FIELD

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CONTENTS

Poetry 1991: Three Review-Essays

AT MY MOTHER'S GRAVE

Being told,
Go away.

So what is left?
This dark space on the road, that was a deer.
So many gifts:
her hazel eyes . . .

What day did she go away?

Walt Whitman,
visitor,
Emily Dickinson,
canoe of light,
Pablo Neruda,
radio flier,
fly me in.

THE FIRST ANGEL

Fat slippery angels,
two by two,
carrying sheaves of straw
to the graveyard,
leaning sheaves of straw
on the gravestones,
straw on the frost stones.

God's hands trembled
when he touched my head,
we are so much in love:
the new moon holding the old moon in her arms.

The first angel said, Write down this:
It is time to leave your past life, leave your plumb-line, your trowel,
your layers of habitation, your perfect finds-tray.

YIELD EVERYTHING, FORCE NOTHING

Years circling the same circle:
the call to be first,
and the underlying want:

and this morning, look! I've finished now,
with this terrific red thing,
with green and yellow rings on it, and stars.

The contest is over:
I turned away,
and I am beautiful: Job's last daughters,
Cinnamon, Eyeshadow, Dove.

The contest is over:
I let my hands fall,
and here is your garden:
Cinnamon. Eyeshadow. Dove.

SYLVIA

What is Eros doing
standing naked among these gravestones almost
6,000 miles from Paphos?
What does he want *now*, another handful
of yellow hair, two blue eyes
and a spine in pain? How is it that he is standing
without a skullcap on? Does he
think it is he who will bring her in? Does he pine
for his mama, does he want to
simper, or stamp his foot, or scratch his back
with his tiny arrow? When was he last
in Pittsburgh, what does he think of these Jews reclining
off route 51? What is love now
doing with death and what is love now planning
in such a garden? What is desire
to him — and longing — what, when he lifts her, is in
his mind? — Where is my plot? —
And where will he take her? Does he think that love
destroys the world, does he think
that love is death, does he think that love
should drop his lyre and throw away
his torch, why does he have to be death too
and carry a vial of mint and a vial
of myrtle? Where does he stash his coins? Where is
Sylvia's meadow? How is this light the
light par excellence? Why is she buried so close
to Pete and Jenny Kaplan, was it
a truncated poplar or a truncated cyprus
that stood above her — was it limestone?
Was there a leaf on her tree? Was it too crowded
in upper K? Eros should trip
over the graves of Libbie and Barrel Barach
once he starts climbing. Eros should
tell me something; Eros should turn his worms
around so they face north; he should

decide on one song, then he should sing, or he could
let the plectrum decide. Eros
should cry when he lifts her, he should have wet cheeks
this time — how does he get there, does he
land like a fly? What does he think of defilement?
Eros should have her picture, he should
kiss her curls, he should brush her lips
with medicine. Who was *his* sister?
How did *his* mama grieve? Is he more heartless
as love or death? I think Sylvia's own granddaughter
would have touched her cheek and stroked her hair
as she did her darling Libbie. As I did too.

TOYS, DREAM

Tonight my mother was born

her infant cry
filled our house
at the outskirts

bathed and so clean
I wrapped her
in a diaper
and laid her in a crib

from the corner I brought
toys
blew twice
into a small plastic trumpet

Made the black wooden horse rock

TEXT, SILK

You closed your eyes, crossed your hands
in the deepest household darkness
over a text full of heresies.

You, too, take up the devil's business,
you, too, be the evangel of love.
Into our body's every opening, grace descends.

The old, already forgotten crime
will give you a giant's strength.
Place your hand on the holy thigh at night.

That's the only way the silk-like
Holy Ghost comes down from heaven
among the cursed.

NOBODY

He shows me tonight
his hair of wire glass and flowers
double-edged lips
five-pointed tongue

Ah he unbuttons
his silk vest —
he has a body after all —
a gold watch

And in the meantime meantime
in the shadow of his trousers
instead of feet
he has two little wheels
devilish little wheels

A FEATHER PLUCKED FROM THE TAIL OF THE FIERY HEN

Let them rest peacefully in ice.
I'm never coming back
to my native mountains,
trees, mists.
I don't give a damn about
forest clearings, mushrooms, wise weasels,
ditches full of last year's snow.

I don't care about wild pigeons.

I'm the Fiery Hen,
I sing at midday
lost in the crowd on the square.

My long pole is my home.

Lord, I'm so glad
to be so rich,
to be so ridiculous.

I see everything with my round eyes.

Oh I'm both dread and happy disposition,
conflagration over all things.
Under my fire-wing
lies the mad world.

I'm the fire that gives the Egg its shape.
I'm the fire that shapes.
I'm fire.

I'm the fiery scold.
The first monster.

The queen of terror
on whose every feather
burns one living
monstrous image.
I'm the monstrous image.
Queen of dread.
Fear at mid-day,
scream,
panic and flutter.
Cramp and light.
Between tearing sounds
the one tearing sound.
The deaf and mute sign
on the frightened mouth.
Golden talon,
golden will,
golden beak.
A beak
that nightly
drinks the slumbering
brains.
Feathers, bones
and blood which
flies.

SONG TO THE LAMB

Lamb indestructible lamb
You who loaded with crystals crossed the mountain
Lamb from the most distant cave
Lamb who peed on the black stones
Yo-yo turning on the highest rock
Lamb with fleece of bones
In the deepest night
You who bleat among the oldest trees

Lamb who remembers
Lamb grazing and browsing the human brain
Lamb who imagined the blue sky
Lamb of all the firmaments
Lamb who leaves behind wild strawberries
Lamb who makes the open eyes open again
Lamb with deepest waters
In your burning eyes
Lamb indestructible lamb

Lamb of dark forest
With a wreath of needles in your fleece
Lamb of juniper bush
With a purple berry in your hoof
Lamb of the deepest abyss you descend down the mountain
Lamb spreading the scent of fir trees at night
Lamb with snowballs of last year snow on your back
Lamb with white teeth oh long-legged Lamb
Who will kill me

Terrifying lamb
You dug for me tonight an appropriate grave
in the midst of the world
Where you'll settle down finally settle down
The way your tongue settles down between my jaws
Accurately settles down

LITTLE PICTURE CATALOGUE

1

In a ghost town
dogs roam
among dead dogs

2

in a blind alley
a boy wheels the halo
of the holy mother

3

in someone's backyard
a crucified
hen

4

from the pipe of a customer
in a whorehouse
a woman's black stocking
rises like smoke

5

in the anteroom
many shoes overcoats
hats gloves
but the house empty
not one human face
to be seen

6

unknown massive gray
objects above the waters
of salvation

AT THE HAIRDRESSER
(phantasmagoria)

At night at the hairdresser's
The angel with bright scissors
And a monstrous comb draws near
To the archangel's funnel-like ear:

If God is dead, if he truly fell in
The abyss, let's place instantly
On his empty throne the hairdresser
Who does our hair so well.

translated by Charles Simic

WINTER FEVER

It was sickness time. The snow was falling. A child in bed under a quilt in a room tropical with his fever.

Someone goes upstairs to review the child's condition, and hollers down, he's burning up.

Another, rubbing his hands together, suggests leaving the door open to let the heat into the rest of the house . . .

Later someone goes upstairs again to review the child's condition and hollers down, he's still burning up.

And is answered, good, the house is just beginning to feel cozy . . .

THE TIME BANK

I was thinking of establishing a time bank. A place where one could put one's spare time, and even earn interest. It would be like any other bank. It would handle checking and mortgages. A man could pay off a mortgage simply by being idle. Another, having a good time, might want to have more time as in the case of orgasm or the death bed thing. He would simply write a time check.

TRIANGLES

It's one of those things.
Like drawing a line in the dust
& putting a chicken's beak
To it. How the hypnosis

Works, I don't know.
It's like placing three pans
Of dog food on the floor
Equally apart.

Triangles are torture.
The dog is condemned
To walk in a circle
Till he drops dead.

That is Dante's first cycle,
Rings looped inside each other
Like a sorcerer's bracelets, a heart
Divided by the trinity of good & evil.

TRAP

I love the jagged, notched
Teeth, how it takes all my strength
To open its jaws, all a boy can muscle.
Its heavy chain like a legiron,

Easily attached to a tree.
The little metal tongue
In its splayed clench, the thing
Where I hook the bait: greasy,

Scented with hunger, the morsel
Waits for an imaginary bear or bobcat.
At the edge of faith, doubtful
The trap will work,

I kneel before it. I know
It takes just a touch,
A mere gesture, shadow of a bird's wing,
As it takes everything inside me to hold back my hand.

RETURNING HOME FROM THE FLIGHT AFTER THE WAR

I came home and the house was gone.
Only ruins marred the courtyard, too:
ends of beams, a hoe handle, a jar,
adobe clinging to adobe
in filthy mating,
and on top of them a mirror, unbroken.

I had lived here, I had been a child here,
the shadows with sacks had sneaked
up into the attic here,
in fall the Moon had crept through the peak-hole
and placed a candle nest to the chimney here.
The rains, the rains, taking off their white shirts,
had come home here.

What mines, shells
and armies danced here?
What fists? The milking stool,
like a suckling, lay on its back
with dead, twisted legs.
Not a tablespoon in the dust,
not a knife, not a living plate,
not a cloud snagged on a pear bough.

Maybe animals, hunted from an airplane,
might dream of so much chaos,
and of so much emptiness bursting apart
as I dreamt of there in the courtyard.
Each palm-sized bit of space was a scaffold's
memory around me. So I sat down upon a dead
section of wall, though I saw myself running,
breathless, in the open meadow,
among bullets, tufts of grass and spurting lumps of earth.

translated by Len Roberts

THE DISTANT BREATH

Parcels come and go between Kolozsvár and Vienna.
Condensed milk, condensed blood,
meat pies and hoarse thanks,
vapor trails in a hidden sky
which only three people know,
speech hides your mouth
and pretense hides the fit of cold,
"Surely, my dears, it's not bad for me here."
Condensed milk, condensed liver.

In the opened parcel's bottom
the hand suddenly touches
that distant pulse in the empty box,
the hand,
and the mouth, unintentionally:
"See, they still remember me."

The counter intelligence agent tosses and turns in his bed.
Secrets cover the furrows
and a small ad covers the secrets.
In a green parcel
under the bed:
a canned heart
and heart-beating.

Kolozsvár, July 1986

translated by Len Roberts and Maria Szende

CODEINE DIARY

On November 15, 1972 — one week after Nixon was re-elected — I clapped my hands for 14 hours and 31 minutes. I was listed in *The Guinness Book of World Records.* I was eleven years old.

My record was published on page 449 of the 1974 edition of *The Guinness Book,* landlocked between the listings for "Largest Circus" and "Club Swinging," in the chapter titled "Human Achievements":

> *Clapping.* The duration record for continuous clapping is 14 hours 31 minutes by Thomas C. Andrews (b. April 30, 1961) at Charleston, West Virginia on November 15, 1972. He sustained an average of 120 claps per minute and an audibility range of at least 100 yards.

*

I would like to feel a stirring in my knee, calf, and ankle: a signal that the blood pooled there is being absorbed at last and the joints are opening again, like a fist or a jonquil.

*

Time passes.

*

I make $12,500 a year. I work as a copy editor for *Mathematical Reviews,* a bibliographic journal for mathematicians, physicists, statisticians, logicians, historians and philosophers of mathematics. When Joyce said he wrote for an ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia, he might well have had our subscribers in mind. At least they seem to be up all night, reading, assaying, scribbling after absolutes in a language the clipped densities of which rival, on a good night, any passage from *Finnegans Wake.*

*

I would like to feel a stirring.

*

Today is Thursday.

*

I'm writing this from my bed at the University of Michigan Hospital. It is 3 a.m. It is the half-dark of hospitals at night. I have had an accident. I have been in an accident.

From my window I can make out the iced-over Huron River and a tennis court covered with a taut white sheet of snow.

*

PHILADELPHIA ENQUIRER NOVEMBER 28, 1972
Martin Bormann Reported Alive in South America
Champion's Routes to Glory

. . . And sometimes champions have highly developed imaginations that help them in their quest for glory. Tom Andrews, only 11, of Charleston, W.Va., applauded without interruption for 14 hours 31 minutes. His father, Ray, so attested in an affidavit he sent to the Guinness Book of World Records.

THE NATIONAL TATTLER January 28, 1973
Boy Breaks Hand-Clapping Record
He Probably Never Will Applaud Anyone!

Dear Tom,

It was certainly nice to read that you have broken the world's record in clapping. Keep your Dad busy getting that affidavit recorded.

We used to enjoy seeing how your Dad recorded you and John in your annual picture for Christmas. The last few years we had lost contact.

Congratulations again. Every one is very proud of you.

Sincerely,
The Ripley Fishers

NATIONAL ENQUIRER September 9, 1973

Director Who Made 'South Pacific' Reveals He Was Mentally Ill For 28 Years

Twins Engaged, Married And Have Babies On Same Day

Smothering Sneezes Can Harm You, Warns Doctor

11-Year-Old Boy Claps 94,520 Times In 14 Hours 31 Minutes

Tom Andrews doesn't expect anybody to give him a hand for breaking a world record. Especially after clapping for himself an astounding 94,520 times!

"I just wanted to break a world record," grinned freckle-faced Tom, who lives with his parents in Charleston, W.Va.

Norris McWhirter, co-compiler of the Guinness Book, told the ENQUIRER: "We don't have many 11-year-olds in the Guinness book. So this is quite a remarkable feat."

Dear Tom,

Try to come out if you can, but if you can't that's o.k. I can play till about 4:00 or 5:00. I hope you come out. Will you walk with me today? Circle YES NO

I think you are the nicest boy over in Rolling Hills. I'm going to try to get you something.

Love, Diane

P.S. Write back if you want to. Don't let anybody else see this except Nan if you want to. Or Laura. I just showed Nan and Laura. Do you mind? Circle YES NO

Answer questions and give back, please.

*

"That your scrapbook?" Ellen, the night nurse, asks.

When I mutter that, technically, it's my mother's, who brought it to the hospital to cheer me up, Ellen glances at the *National Enquirer* headline and says, "You did that? Clapped your hands?"

I nod.

"Lord!" she says. "Did you have a major bleed, or what?"

*

Two days after my brother died I learned to juggle apples.

As children John and I stared in wonder at jugglers, at the blurred orbits of their hovering knives or bowling pins, at their taunting nonchalance. Gravity flowed from their fingers. Two days after John died, in Charleston for the funeral, I traced on notebook paper the looping flight-paths three objects must follow to remain aloft while being shuttled from hand to hand. I was staying at my great-aunt's apartment on Kanawha Boulevard. She kept a bowl of fresh fruit on a coffee table in the living room, where I found three apples of serviceable size and with them made an inelegant leap from theory to practice. I kept dropping the same apple. Once it fell against a corner of the coffee table: the yellow skin split and juice began to drip. I dropped it again. More juice. And again. The smell was terrific, sweet as just-washed hair. Eventually I could keep all three bruised, dripping apples weaving in mid-air, circulating. Gravity flowed from my fingers.

*

I have had an accident.

*

Time passes.

*

I have had an accident on the sidewalk. I watched my feet come out from under me on the iced concrete with a kind of anecdotal perspective. The bleeding inside the joints, the infusions of factor VIII, the weeks of immobility, the waiting for codeine, the inventions with which my mind would veer in the direction of solid ground — as my weight drilled into the twisting leg I saw the whole pantomime emerge with the clarity of blown glass.

*

Sunrise. The sky gray and pink.

*

My roommate, an elderly man with endstage heart disease, was rolled in on a stretcher today. Oxygen tubes curl around his ears, line his cheek, enter his nostrils. His wife reads newspapers while he sleeps. They look uncannily alike: white-haired, slight, their salmon-colored faces stretched tightly across the facial bones. He's yet to be awake in this room.

*

When I told my hematologist that as a teenager I had raced motocross, that in fact in one race in Gallipolis, Ohio, I had gotten the holeshot and was bumped in the first turn and run over by twenty-some motorcycles, she said, "No. Not with your factor level. I'm sorry, but you wouldn't withstand the head injuries. You like the sound of yourself being dramatic."

*

The riffled sea of my sheets.

*

There is a mathematical process, useful to physicists and probability theorists, called the "self-avoiding random walk." Walter, one of *MR*'s physics editors, once explained it to me as a succession of movements along a lattice of given dimensions, where the direction and length of each move is randomly determined, and where the walk does not return to a point already walked on. I almost wept with delight.

Walter looked confused. "You studied randomness in school?" he said, earnestly.

*

So many infusions of factor VIII . . .

As the concentrate filters into the I.V. drip I feel the cold rise up through the upper arm, the shoulder, then branch off descending into the chest. I contain multitudes.

*

Heels clicking by in the hallway.

*

Later I learned that Walter would sometimes perform a kind of mime when he was drunk, a bodily interpretation of the self-avoiding random walk. Walter wore wire-rim glasses and a long, dazzlingly unkempt beard. He had close friends everywhere: Kyoto, Glasgow, Milan, Leningrad, Sao Paulo, Cape Town. I tried to imagine his self-avoidance. Head crooked severely, eyes fixed, doll-like, in the opposite direction, feet turned alternately inward and outward, arms flailing somehow along trajectories his head, eyes, and feet did not intersect. I liked Walter. He refused to publish a review of any paper that referred to "cone-shaped objects" and their velocity, heat-seeking ability, etc.

*

In the hallway in the shunt-light
of the hallway
you wake
a nurse comes to show you
to your room
but can't find it
the entire wing is missing
you look outside
there in the gravel lot the sleet
pounding its fists
your white gown is walking home

*

Ellen takes the ice-pack off my right calf and feels for a pulse at the ankle. She's been doing this every five minutes throughout the night to make sure the pressure of bleeding hasn't compressed and finally flattened the blood vessels. I'm a half-hour or so into a dose of codeine: removing the ice-pack doesn't make me cry out.

"It's still so hot," she says, meaning the skin around the calf. "You could fry an egg on it."

*

Glaring light. Shocking cold of the bedpan.

*

The President through the TV's drift and snow: "Things are even more like they are now than they've ever been."

*

Body positioning, weight distribution, throttle control.

Work with the bike. Don't fight it.

The sooner you shift your weight out of a corner, the sooner you can accelerate. Don't lose time between braking and accelerating.

Use the bike's ability to control itself.

Preparing the bike — the gear ratios, the suspension, the jetting — ahead of time will help your ability to concentrate on the race.

Concentration: don't let something stupid happen in the lulling middle of a race.

Adapt to the track as it changes. Be on the lookout for alternative lines.

Racing in the rain: controlled insanity. Get out front to avoid being roosted with mud from the rear tires of other riders.

*

There are times, in the last minutes before I am allowed, or allow myself, more codeine, when the pain inside the joints simplifies me utterly. I feel myself descending some kind of evolutionary ladder until I become as crude and guileless as an amoeba. The pain is not personal. I am incidental to it. It is like faith, the believer eclipsed by something immense . . .

*

You like the sound of yourself being dramatic.

*

Carrie's with me, often, during the day.

Her face. Her being here.

Our talks, and long easy silences.

*

"Does he have to do that?" the waitress at Pizza Hut asked. She passed out glasses of ice water from a tray, then set the tray down on the table.

"He's breaking a world record," John said flatly.

"Does it bother you?" my mother said. "I can't make him stop, but we can leave."

The waitress looked up. "You're joking, right? Let me see." She gestured for me to pull my hands out from under the table.

I showed my hands. Eyes, hostile, were staring from neighboring booths and tables.

"He has to sustain an audibility range of at least 100 yards," John said.

"I'm getting the cook," she said. "He's got to see this."

A minute later a thin man with botched teeth, wearing a blue dough-smeared apron, was glaring at me. "Well," he said impatiently, "let's see your deal."

Again I showed my hands. I speeded up, just a little, the rate of clapping.

"Right. Unbelievable," the cook said, shaking his head and disappearing.

I said, "Can we order?"

"What do you do if you have to go to the bathroom?" the waitress asked.

"I'd like a root beer," I said. "Do you have root beer?"

"He's trying to go the whole day without going," my mother said.

"Good luck!" the waitress said.

I said, "Do you have root beer?"

"Yeah, they have root beer," John said.

I said, "I was asking *her*, thank you very much."

"I don't think I could go the whole day," the waitress said. "I think I have a weak bladder."

I leaned over to John and whispered: "*Help.*"

"Hey," said the waitress, "how are you going to eat pizza?"

"I'm not," I said. "I'm just sipping some root beer. If you have it."

"They have it, they have it," John said.

John buried his head in his hands.

"I'm going to feed him," my mother said.

"No way!" I said.

For a second I forgot to clap, then caught myself and re-established my rhythm.

"We'll have a large mushroom and pepperoni," my mother said. "And I'd like a glass of iced tea. What do you want to drink?"

"I want a Coke," John said.

"Root beer," I said.

*

Night. Snow falling past the window. It is codeine, breaking up and falling softly over the small field and train tracks, over the plowed roads, over the houses and apartment buildings, the river, the tall trees furred with ice.

*

When I was falling in love with Carrie I wanted to astonish her with some simple devastating gesture, like the harmonica line in Neil Young's "Heart of Gold."

*

My roommate's lungs labor through sleep, each breath a furrow plowed in earth.

*

Time passes.

*

After the waitress left, my mother lectured me about not participating in events we scheduled on John's "off-days" — days when he wasn't on the dialysis machine. "You've known for a week that we were coming here. You could have picked another day for this clapping business." She said this in front of John, who grimaced and began looking around the room.

My argument was that just being there at Pizza Hut, while I was in the crucial early hours of breaking a world record, was sufficient participation, and that sipping a little root beer, under the circumstances, put me solidly in the off-day spirit of things.

She didn't see it that way.

I asked John what he thought. He shook his head; he wanted nothing to do with this conversation.

I kept clapping under the table. Later, after the waitress asked, giggling, if everything was all right with our pizza, I let my mother feed me a bite or two.

*

The sound of a dog barking ferociously.

*

There is a sleep like the long dissolve
of bone into brown dirt. The nurse carries
a paper cup, a syringe of that sleep . . .

But the chrysanthemums, and the trees outside
the window, say: *You are never tired enough.*

My second breath says it, and the room's tick,
the star-tiled floor, the chalk walls
through the night hours. I lie listening

as though to a voice inside my voice, a lullaby
deep in the throat. Now a small snowfall.
Now a first blur of sun staining the window.

*

Listening to Carrie's Walkman. A radio play from the 50s.

"Hey, how'd you like a nice cool tall glass of water, chock-full of ice?"

"Sounds great."

"Well you're not going to get it you murderer!"

*

Dawn. Sunlight in defined rays through the clouds like spokes of a great wheel. There is a word for it. Yes. Sundog.

*

I was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, graduated *summa cum laude* in philosophy, and went to work at 7-11. This was in 1984. I wasn't terribly well qualified, but I had worked at Sears when I was in high school and the manager needed a body behind the cash register pronto. So I got the job. When the matter of my hemophilia came up, the manager shrugged and said, "You shouldn't have any trouble. Unless somebody knocks you out or something."

I asked how often that was likely to happen.

"Hardly ever. Two months ago on the midnight shift a guy bashed my face in with a pistol butt. But that's really rare. If a guy holds you up, Southland wants you to give up the money. Don't be a hero. But since we just got hit up the odds are it won't happen again for, oh, eight months or so. It's the cycle of things."

*

Günter Eich wrote that "in each good line of poetry I hear the cane of the blindman striking: I am on secure ground now." Good or bad, each sentence I get down before the codeine wears off is a toehold toward equilibrium. Each phrase, quotation, memory, self-avoiding or not.

*

John, you're vague as mist, dressed up in dew, smoke. I keep seeing you, haunting the hawthorn trees within earshot of the river bank. Asking nothing.

*

On Election Day I called my hematologist.

"Fourteen hours of clapping," she said, "could provoke a bleed in the palms, the wrists, in the muscles of the forearms . . ."

*

The days are perceptibly longer, lighter.

*

My leg shimmers, spreading its colors like a peacock: cinnabar, copper, rust, olive, ruddle, gentian, umber . . .

*

Brother, I always compare you
to a drifting log with iron nails in it
You float ashore I pick you out on the beach
I'm building a small house with you
I always compare you to the sun
when the earth grows dark awhile
passing behind the clouds

*

I can see my heart beat through my hospital gown.

*

What surprised me was how easy it was to keep a precise and consistent rhythm. Two hours into the record I felt as if my hands, like the legs of runners who have broken through the "wall," could hammer away at themselves effortlessly and indefinitely. At that point I knew I would not start a bleed. I had no doubt. And yet my hands kept hammering at themselves. Hammering.

*

Sometimes my roommate's breathing speeds up suddenly, like quick deep hits on a cigarette. This lasts only a few seconds.

*

Time passes.

*

"Nixon's problem is, he's not eating right," my mother said. "It's plain as day, anyone can see it. Just look at the man."

It was 5:30 p.m. and I was still at it, 120 claps per minute.

"Care for a drink?" my father said to himself. "Don't mind if I do, thank you for asking."

*

This morning I missed the plastic urinal, fouling the sheets.

*

The knee is locked at a 45° angle. Blood rushed the joint's interior, filled it, kept rushing. The muscles are shrinking to the shape of the bent leg.

"Straighten it as far as you comfortably can," says my hematologist. "But don't push it. What we want to avoid is another bleed inside the joint."

Yes. *Yes.*

*

A creekbed some goldenrod the tall
grasses arcing
over the flat field
you're walking a thin dirt path
the creek the faint rush of water
you watch your breath rise
like woodsmoke in first light
as a sudden memory
of ice across flesh returns the night
nurse saying *good morning*

*

Outside, snow's falling again. The loyal and fragmented snow.

*

This bed as embryonic world. Its vast cerulean distances, its equatorial thickets. Regions of hissing ash, monsoons, midnight suns. To move my leg a few inches: an emigration from Tashkent to Bogotá. To turn over: an impossible odyssey, a tale for Jules Verne.

*

Carrie tells me about a snowman children have built near our apartment. It's wearing Ray-Ban sunglasses and stereo headphones. I imagine the children at work on the torso. Snowball fights. Circling footprints. Their serious expressions, as if they'd just been reading the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The breath from their curses pluming in air.

*

She comes and goes, my hematologist. Sometimes a half dozen interns cluster around her. They look like children, rich white kids playing doctor, stethoscopes dangling absurdly from their gleaming necks.

*

Glancing through a galley set from *MR* I find a paper—"Specification of an Algorithm for the Economizing of Memory" — with this: "An associative memory can be defined as a transformation between two sets. . . . This associative memory is shown to converge rapidly, and to have noise rejection properties and some learning capability."

*

here, now.

A pressure, a packed-in rawness in my back. Like a boot heel pressing down hard, but from inside the tissue out.

I'm pushing a hole through the buzzer to Ellen. A bruise in my thumb is nothing.

*

Hours in codeine's loose grip.

*

In the parking lot outside Pizza Hut John stepped on the heel of my shoe. My heel popped out. "Flat tire?" John said.

I tried to slide back into my shoe without using my hands, which clapped and clapped.

"Knock knock," John said.

"Who's there," I said.

My mother held the door to Pizza Hut open for us.

"Tom," he said.

"Forget it," I said. "Nothing doing."

*

X-rays: thick smears of charcoal. I've bled into the muscles along the spinal column. "If the bleeding becomes intraspinal," my hematologist says, "paralysis is a not-unlikely scenario." What can we do? "We can maintain," she says, "a factor VIII level of 40% to 50% for 10 to 14 days."

*

I turn my name over in my hand;
dull sleeve I slide in and out of.

*

For a long time I asked John to come watch me race. Again and again he refused. Finally he agreed to come to a race at Hidden Hills Raceway in Gallipolis, Ohio — to shut me up, I think, as much as to satisfy his curiosity about his hemophiliac brother racing a motorcycle across the gouged wilderness.

The road from Charleston to Gallipolis follows the Kanawha River to Point Pleasant, where the Kanawha and the Ohio Rivers converge in a vast capital T sunk into bottom land. We passed coal barges drudging through the black water, their wakes spreading across the width of the river and lapping both banks. Before we got to Point Pleasant a heavy rain started. Past Gallipolis, just past the farms and headquarters of Bob Evans Restaurants, we turned off the interstate onto a series of rain-slicked fire-roads that led to the track. We were hauling: three times the pick-up nearly slid off the road's shoulder. Eventually we pulled into the pit area at Hid-

den Hills. I wondered what John made of the scene. Riders tooling the pits with their helmets and shirts off, sideburned, thick arms tattooed and flexing. The smell of Bel-Ray oil and WD40. The ribbon of track snaking the Ohio landscape. Someone gunning a bike's motor; its spit and cough before going silent. He said nothing.

I knew John would have to wear a plastic bag over his shunt arm to keep the dust out. We were lucky it rained. Dust usually billowed wildly after the start of a race, a huge rolling wave breaking over the hills and shrouding the spectators. Rain would keep the dirt moist and on the track.

Midway through the practice sessions, however, the rain stopped. By the time of the first 125 moto, dust forced John into the cab of the pick-up.

That is the image that attacks me now. John in the truck, windows rolled up, reading a book to pass the time while I kicked up the dust all around him.

*

An endless surge and drip of facts from the TV . . .

Israel is the most successful nation in the world in increasing rainfall artificially . . .

1 billion years ago the sun was 20% to 30% dimmer . . .

Donald Duck received 291 votes in the Swedish election for Prime Minister . . .

Hang gliders in Los Angeles are using their bird's eye view to help local police and fire departments . . .

*

This fierce inward stalking of patience.

*

I can feel the spinal muscles harden, filling with blood. I cannot straighten my back. The skin is boiling, sharp dots of heat along the spine like water in a pan. Or, alternately, an even heat just under the skin's surface, a steady flaming intensity.

*

"You have to imagine Richard Nixon as a little boy," my mother said. "A boy with a mother and a father, just like everybody else."

Now I tried to muffle the sound of my clapping.

"It's not that simple," my father said, "and you know it."

*

Carrie holding watch over me. Sadness visible in the folds of her wrinkled clothes.

*

The cycle of things. The room ticking.

*

In this morning's dream I was a clarinetist, giving a concert at DeVos Hall in Grand Rapids, soloing in a piece titled "Concerto for Clarinet and Cheese." It was poorly attended. At a certain point in the performance the sound of my clarinet began to dwindle, as if a microphone were being turned down slowly. The baffled conductor stopped the orchestra. I played on. One could barely hear the melody by now, but the sound of the clarinet valves clicking open and shut was rising inexplicably through the concert hall, becoming a simultaneous music, underneath or alongside the blown notes, feeding them with staccato percussion. In this way the melody, slowly restored, and the clicking of the valves met as equals in the performance . . .

*

I can't shut out the sound of my roommate's breathing.

*

This morning my banana had a "Cholesterol Free" sticker on it.

*

9:00 a.m. My mother and father arrive, emissaries from the mysterious sunlit world.

*

Random symmetries . . . Days when John's shunt clotted and he required I forget how many cc's of heparin to get his blood to stop coagulating.

Meanwhile, I'd start a bleed, and would need cryoprecipitate or factor VIII to get my blood to clot . . .

*

Time passes.

*

Tomorrow's forecast: "Just clouds."

*

More X-rays. I've stopped bleeding into the spinal muscles. Soon enough, my hematologist says, my body will loosen and break down and absorb the hardened blood surrounding the spine, as it has been doing in my leg. There has been no intraspinal bleeding, no bleeding into the kidney or liver.

I look at Carrie. I look at my mother and father. We are inside a sudden astonishing calm. I seem to levitate and hover over the white sheets . . .

*

Once when John was dialyzing I tripped into the machine and jerked a tube clean out of its socket. John's blood pumped and sprayed into the air, splattering across the carpet and splotching our skin and clothes. My mother worked frantically to reconnect the tube and to stabilize John's blood pressure.

Later I noticed that some of the blood had seeped inside a picture frame on the wall beside the dialysis chair. The frame held a photograph of John and me wading in the Kanawha River, staring hard at the gray water.

*

Walking. Dew clings to the bunch grass.
The I.V. pushes a ghost-needle back
into the vein. As I touch the bruises,

my eyes find work in the early sunlight,
my feet find their prints in the field.

UNDER

The nap I woke from left me deep
as a trout travelling winter latitudes.
All through dinner I allowed light to elude me,
lingered in my snow-deep breathing.

The way you told it, your skates flew down
the Millstone River. Nobody you knew skated so far,
12 miles down-river. You never met
friends accidentally in the street,
you learned to be invisible in New Jersey.

I wished for your disappearing art after supper,
all those names and faces looming in and away —
calling me further than I could go.
I made you my familiar, my contact, my beacon.

> When my cousins found me on the frozen beach
> singing, spaced-out 6-year-old riding
> the carousel at the closed amusement park,
> no one said a word. I knew I could vanish.

You skated down the hallway heading home
empty of stories, I trailed after,
frozen wool against my palms, wooden mare
turning the slow season, speckled tunes
and oompah lights. Dead of December,
content in my calm and utterly, utterly under.

for pk

SURRENDER

I am emptying my chest onto the lawn
turning my house inside out. Antique lace,
silken camisoles, slips thin as skin
hung where they don't belong.

I held his hand for hours, I could not see
how he could empty himself from his body.
How his skin could let him go.
I thought that trick, that turning
is how the dead know.

There's smoke over the crematory,
a little wind fills with rain,
there was a man on the couch
with a morphine meter counting his way down.

Air so wet it spatters, rain riven
gowns and negligees — weather changes
silk, the feel, the hue.
How can a body let go like that?
Into hunger that sweeps up and pushes under.

I told him everything, slow,
from the beginning as if the story
would keep him. Words to burn.
White slips on the lawn, turning
myself inside out.

for Gray Lambert, 1958-1991

MATER MOTHER

Oak, Boulder, Slope

Cowled in ice, slicked with its black lacquers, old stone,
freckled pate, the boulder humps over its bone
of darkness, its shadow-wool of under thought,
massy burl of earth and oak-root: it's
perched and balanced like a crow. Well of ink,
skull bowl, I know your tricks. You think
light hoods and halos you, its wet stole
refracting an arc of light like a bowl's
sideways grin, its celadon crackling of ice
like the glaze of vases. But underneath,
you're dense as disbelief: a batholith,
an iron mother.

BREASTPLATE

When the war rains down over breakers and beaches
I'll go out to meet it armed with my look
My hair done up in a heavy sob
I'll stretch out flat on my face
On the wing of a bomber
And I'll wait
When the cement flares up off the sidewalks
I'll follow the path of bombs through the faces
    of the crowd
I'll stick to the ruins
Like a tuft of fur on a nude
My eye will follow the long contours of grief
The dead glittering with sunlight and blood
Will fall silent at my sides
Nurses gloved with skin
Will wade in the smooth liquid of human life
And the dying will burn
Like straw castles
Colonnades will sink
Stars will moan
Even flannel pants will be swallowed
In the giant room of fear
And I'll sneer my bared teeth violet with rapture
        frenzied
Generous hysteric
When the war rains down over breakers and beaches
I'll go out to meet it armed with my look
My hair done up in a heavy sob

LIGHT AS A SHUTTLE DESIRE

Why cry over the bald head of boredom
Hateful or else
Aesthetic
Reasoner
Bored with the French
I know very well to sew false eyelashes to my eyelids
The agate dispels hatred with a pale glance
I know to mock the shadow who closes doors
When love
Smacks its waiting lips in the corridor
While rereading your letters I think of our walks
The promises of summer that put off the Place Dauphine
Yawn under the bell
It's already five o'clock
Gone the flying deer the paved sages the heedless dust
The square flower bed jumbled like a handkerchief
The lewd look swallowed
The sweaters heap up on the clothes hook
The night a sluggish drainpipe
Beautiful disorder on my table
Why cry over a tub of blood
Why rummage among those old thighs
Venice
I'm ready to protect you
From my hollyhock tongue my soft grove
Ready to sculpt my hair
To fly to the shopkeepers
To stumble damp again into your unreliable arms
Why stay here to dress up and amuse myself
Why answer
Why run away

The memory of your icy sleep
Follows me step by step
When will I be able to see you again
Without spilling tears
On myself

translated by Molly Bendall

LANGUOR

After the painting "Indolence" by Jean-Baptiste Greuze

What if I stayed in my slippers, sat by the window
and watched the apples rot from their limbs, the leaves
swirl into makeshift drifts? The world would ferment
around me and my hair would turn into wild brambles.
If bird took up residence there and a young one
dropped from its nest, I would not stoop to help it.
Little downy bird, flailing around the floor
with useless wings, your parents will not help you;
they're afraid of me though I have not moved
and have no plans to move.

Why do you think
the old refuse to wash? When you enter their homes
a stale sweetness wallops the senses; there is
a whole life to be smelled. Decades of hair oil
collect like ghosts on the antimacassars, cups
are filled with toast crumbs, cat hairs cling
to the shoulders of easy chairs though the cat
has been dead for years. But none of it's bad;
it's like old shoes or a nightgown with holes.
The old cling to their smell and dirt
because it's theirs, they know it intimately
and it won't leave after the husbands
die and the animals pass away and the children
forget to visit.

Much is mistaken
for carelessness. In deep burgundies and grays you
painted a woman slumped on a three legged stool.
Her blouse is untied and her breasts swell over the gathers;
long hair escapes its scarf and her stockings slip their garters.
The floor is cobblestone, clay jugs tipped over
and most of the kitchen's gone undone; still, this woman
does not look lazy. Outside her cottage the plague is raging,

the streets have turned to sewers, the dead are stacked
like dirty dishes. Everyone is dying, Jean-Baptiste,
and this beautiful tired woman is about to drag her stool
to the back window which overlooks a golden field,
trees bent with the irony of rosy apples.

READING VIRGIL

from this ledge of sun where I sit, black shirt burning,
looking up sometimes into the wells
of dark the living room preserves, I can see
how the venetian lights,
striping the floor, hinge a passageway from this world
to the next
where *The Georgics* instructs the sill's terrarium
in seed-time and in flower.
How easily my guide telescopes into the dwarfed
dimension: If you can't
be a vegetarian, the cardiac evangelist on t.v. advises,
then eat the vegetarians
of the sea — clams, oysters, scallops. But those
opalescent mouthfuls
wobble against the tongue like sheep's eyes in Virgil,
swollen with plague and death to eat.
"As storm-squalls run across the surface of the sea
Disease comes, not killing sheep singly."
And the destruction moves down the hillsides into the sea,
taking appetite
to its demise in salt, which kills as it preserves,
ruins the soil
but keeps the meat, though not for those of us alive
at the end of the poem
who seek, momentarily, to live on sunlight
and air
like the almost-all-chlorophyll spider fern,
producing nothing
but itself and spiky shadows across the page.

EARLIER

When life
left something to be desired
and the great trees
still stood, unprepared
for loss of leaves,
when the soul
still hadn't begun to rustle around
in the refrigerator at night,
and time lost its way
on detours,
when God, with that severe upper lip,
spoke from clouds
and no one asked,
in a pretty place,
"Do you speak German?"
When a sick neighbor
really started dying
next door,
and mother and child looked for
the battered women's shelter in vain —
when everything was really
much much worse,
when the moon rose so magically
— these days we'd shake our head — and
there was no lack of bibles,
death aplenty
waiting patiently
the other side of funerals.
Genetics is contained
in unborn brains.
A break in the brain was a way
of accommodating the unavoidable,
the way life
leaves something to be desired.

DARING

Take note: the sweetest daring's
the one at the end of your life.
You order what you'd like:
ballads, small phrases.
It's only your body
that's affected.
You count things up,
repeat the sum, surprise!
Lips open too far.
That's just seduction.
You start smiling, without a care;
the better, the bad lot is:
good fortune's not going to save you.
You'll be forgotten in a blink.
You look pretty good like that.
Quickly, you're able to add:
I love. And there you were, a child
in an apron, little white socks, coming
running. The names repeat.
Simple things are going around.
No one will ever think:
he's gone. And: did he dare live?

NICE

Nice, like repeating
something done with the hand.
At the same time, you do exist: deadly
for me, pure and manic.
Nice, like deception
or edible matter
and whatever remains
of disease: deadly.
Nice: palpable in a pathological
way, and eating whatever
you like with your hands.
Nice, like
forgetting winter
every summer: it's
so deadly, like
blood sugar fluctuation,
when you let yourself be possessed,
impure, still quite frigid.
Later, there's soft dust,
painted eyes: nice,
like the mouth moving
while talking. I'm
listening now: to a strange grammar.
How do we live?

WAKING DREAM

An Alka-Seltzer morning and afterward
you sweat noon totally away. Apparitions
of Hölderlin and Trakl's death come to you.
The meanings are too diffuse. You just feel:

something in your throat, and you're on fire
from summer. Or is it fall by now? You're
not entirely sure what's happened: I mean,
your memory's still dull. In a waking dream

the season can shoot past. Trakl staggers
in a rush of drugs and Hölderlin politely
says, Thank you, whenever anyone visits him.

He raises his finger. Trakl's sister
doesn't cry over Helian anymore. Image
for image, things seem changed, and damned.

translated by Stuart Friebert

HEIDI

For a long time now I have been thinking about Heidi. I have tried to write about her and her crippled rich friend, Clara, to write about the naughty goat-boy, Peter, and each time I have tried to tell the story, I have failed. And yet the other day, as I was leafing through a magazine I found a picture of a little girl on crutches. She was pointing at something not in the picture, something, if I remember, off to her left, and she, even reduced in size and badly printed as she was, seemed to be saying, "Jim, try just one more time." So I shut my eyes and tried to remember when I first read *Heidi*. And I asked myself what were my feelings when, as a child myself, I first saw this cheerful and resourceful young girl wearing only a thin, red dress, surrounded by mountain peaks and pastures and playful goats. Was my interest sexual, I thought, but then I remembered the scene of Peter pushing helpless Clara down a cliff, crippling her for life and I thought well yes, that sounds like something I would do.

And in fact this is where it gets confusing, because I don't remember *Heidi* very well, and sometimes I'm not sure which part is in the novel and which is in my memory, as for example that part where Heidi moves from the mountains to the city to live with Clara, and then after a few weeks of going to plays and concerts and cultural events of all sorts, on the way home from one of these they find a horse being beaten while it's trying to pull a load of coal up an icy hill, and it turns out that Clara recognizes the horse as one she used to own, and the horse's name is "Beauty," — "Beauty, Beauty, after all these years!" Clara weeps — and although a part of me senses that must have been another story, still, like a person who has a lingering disease so long that he and his disease are interchangable, I can't take that part out, or give up the scene where after Heidi's grandfather dies, and Clara is taken back to the city for orthopedic surgery after Heidi's friend, Peter, has pushed her off a cliff, Heidi is taken on as a companion, not out of real affection but in the way sometimes a racehorse will travel with a cat or other animal, and eventually Heidi gets homesick and goes back to the mountain. But if that is the case I have to

ask myself why would a generation of anybody, especially children, be interested in this story? Is it because it says home is best? Is it because it contains death, and accident, and hope? And if so what hope? And anyway, now that I think about it Peter may not have pushed Clara off the cliff, but just her wheelchair, because she had come to the mountains already injured; this was just a vacation, and though her parents were wealthy, money can't buy everything. So Peter pushes her wheelchair off a cliff to demonstrate how much he scorns modern medicine, which, after all, hasn't been able to cure their little visitor from the city, and in order so Peter won't get in trouble Heidi says, "Walk, I know you can do it," and forces Clara to take the first steps of her whole life without her crutches, and Clara does, because, though I may be mixing this story up with *The Miracle Worker*, where Helen Keller, despite her tremendous handicaps, is able to overcome them all through her love for her teacher, Annie Sullivan, Clara loves and respects Heidi in a similar way. And then as repayment for her doing this for their daughter, not out of condescension at all, Clara's parents take Heidi to the city where she is treated as well as any child could ever be treated, in fact like a queen, is taken to one cultural event after another, but despite this she still becomes bored and misses her Grandfather, who may not be dead at all as I first thought, but back in his village, and like the little boy in Chekhov who, sleeping in some Moscow corner in a pile of rags, dreams of his grandfather and his grandfather's big dog in his village and writes him a letter, addressing it: "To Grandfather, the Village," in which he asks the old man to come and rescue him; so Heidi pines until one night when all the children are asleep and Peter comes in through the open window and takes Heidi back with him to the mountain, because he knows instinctually she is homesick and can't be happy without him, even though it's possible, now that I think of it, that Heidi is just getting over this initial bout of homesickness. And Peter, though he's just twelve or thirteen, is already sexually mature and has marked Heidi as the one he wants to marry, the one he'll keep from going back to school, prevent her, he thinks, from ever leaving the village again, and he'll remind her whenever he gets the chance, which will be fre-

quently, that that rich Clara and her parents, though they could buy anything, couldn't buy a love like his. And when the Second World War begins and Switzerland, though neutral, is engulfed in a flood of refugees, one, a violinist, comes to the village where Heidi now is a young woman, and plays his violin in a window beneath which Heidi passes. She hears him and they start to talk — it turns out he knew Clara, and he describes how her friend was unable to flee her homeland and became an early victim of the war. They fall in love and flee the mountain together, leaving Peter to vent his wrath on the helpless goats who seem to ask, "What have we done anyway?"

So Heidi takes up oil painting, works a year or two, then, in the heady climate following the war, has her first international exhibition, a huge success. And as she walks home after the opening, alone on the snow-strewn streets savoring her triumph, she comes upon a beggar, a little girl, selling matches; it's getting colder and as the girl lights the matches one by one to keep herself warm, she uses them all up, which is foolish because if she had only found a couple newspapers, maybe some twigs, a crate or two, she could have built a perfectly fine fire that would have lasted the whole night and maybe attracted a few customers as well, but of course because she hasn't now she's freezing to death and Heidi, passing by, has got too great an idea for a painting ever to see her — an idea for a painting which will sum up everything that's happened in her life and what it means and why it's so important.

THE AUTUMN SKY

Another foggy morning in the last days of summer.
Still I just go through it without opinion.
I thought the dog was street-wise with his ball
between his paws although the blue sky harmonized
outward in rays that were fur, or rivulets,
or sprouts, and the blue ball was always like that
when autumn in the first leaves thought.

The ball went best between his paws during
conversation as he lifted his nose and ears up
toward the leaves and eaves. Between his paws,
one paw touched the ball.
And, in the yard sale arrangements up one narrow
city street and arisen on another, it was secure.

GREEN CHEVY

That double blue, the blue sky
and the water far down the hill
all the green, treetops at our feet,
up the hill above us, all the near
horsetails, cut grass, blackberries
and the garden flowers: my heart,

because the holly pricked my feet
and because they told me how
I crawled in the old green car
in 1950, pushed the emergency
brake and started downhill
at two, and my mother's voice yet

which ran out to the moving car
to get me, and their music
which came outdoors into day
and dark from the piano,
the accordian, and yet the friends
who spoke Swedish in the kitchen.

Up the hills the older suburbs
have streets past video rentals
with too much traffic and far out
the asphalt is even harder — two
blocks from the house where we
went to school, after my father

was gone, I thought our old car
was the classic model that
spun past me, let me look
once more at part of my heart
let me sense once more any
heart at all like that.

CLEVER SKATA

Out on a swept expanse of brick all done
in arcs, another arc, and another, just as I round
the corner from the Rigsarkivet, no one is around
but a building shadow, myself, and clever Skata.

Skata imitates a road in Montana, or Iowa.
We ride and Magpie flashes his wing
on a wire fence. I sort my recollections.
No, I have never seen sweet Skata in my life.

Oh, on the rooftop in the suburbs. Oh,
from the window of a train. Skata at
the park and also on a tin: a tray. And oh,
clever Skata and a pretty lamb. I walk on,

for, oh, I cannot use a small tin tray. And I
think I saw Skata at the museum. Clever Skata.

JAPANESE

Horned and iridescent
As metallic paint

They are, in themselves,
Beautiful jewels.

They refract the light
From their facets,

Their laminal backs,
Gold verging on verdigris

There on the beach-
Peas' flutter of flesh.

Only when you find them
In your garden,

Filigreeing the leaves,
Or groping blindly upon

Each other in those
Slow mineral ecstasies,

Do you remember the roses
Your mother mourned,

Dusting the blown
And tattered blossoms.

And whether in praise
Of perishing things

Or sorrow's love of them,
You move through the rows,

The two stones flat as
The palms of your hands,

Plagued by such beauty,
And clap.

SALTING THE SLUGS

They'd lain out in the sun for weeks,
The boards I'd lapped lengthwise
The length of the fence, long enough
Now for light to have backed down
The vein-work of the weeds beneath them,
Draining the leaves of color, parching
The fizzled roots. When I turned them over,
Widening the row, I found the slugs
Flayed naked in a radiance they'd hid from,
Trailing the slick sheen of their wakes.

They were what I remembered, bodies
From a depth, glycerin and polyp.
They were what I touched in the wet mulch
Bedded about the base of plants.
When the salt hit them they boiled over,
Froth erupting from their churning sides,
Antlers collapsing toward that spittle.
They were what writhed slowly, as though
Seltzering into blossom, there
Where the flesh lay salted with fire.

GRIM TOWN IN A STEEP VALLEY

This valley: as if a huge, dull, primordial axe
once slammed into the earth
and then withdrew — X millennia ago.
A few flat acres
ribbon either side of the river sliding sluggishly
past the clocktower, the convenience store.
If a river could look over its shoulder,
glad to be going, this one would.
In town center: a factory of clangor and stink,
of grinding and oil,
hard howls from drill bits
biting sheets of steel. All my brothers
live here, every cousin, many dozens
of sisters, my worn aunts
and numb uncles, the many many of me,
a hundred sad wives,
all of us countrymen and women
born next to each other behind the plow
in this valley, each of us
pressing to our chests a loaf of bread
and a jug of milk. . . . The river is low
this time of year and the bedstones' blackness
marks its lack
of depth. A shopping cart
lies on its side in center stream
gathering branches, detritus, silt,
forcing the already weak current to part for it,
dividing it, but even so diminished
it's glad to be going,
glad to be gone.

A LARGE BRANCH SPLINTERED OFF A TREE IN A STORM

and was hurled to the ground like a spear.
In the morning there it stood, upright,
a new tree, twenty feet tall, sprung overnight.
Torn off with such force
it impales by several inches the grass and earth

and as I haul it out
I think: what if this very spot,
what were the chances — mathematically, spatially,
time-of-day-wise, cosmically — what odds
this spot could have been my wife's heart,

my baby's fontanel? Normal thinking
or normal (slash) paranoid?
I pull the branch — the white pith
of the wood stained by the wet earth — out,
bending to grip it at the base,

it was that deep. Torn from its source,
its leaves just beginning to wilt,
their gray backs closing like fists
around the greener fronts.
And then with my hatchet I hacked it up.

AN ELEPHANT CROSSED THE ROAD

An elephant crossed the road and everyone
bowed to the ground.
He couldn't play the piano. I told
you that.
Worms came out only on dry days. A Copt
hummed a verse.
Ten yards of cotton cut to the match. Two pairs
of pinch pleated drapes.
Rivers drowned in each other's mouths, and
blisters were everywhere.
I saw the scar where the dog bit him
when he was seven.
Lesions were so deep they broke
the bone.
He rubbed the cloth between two fingers,
just as I'm doing now.

There were two lines and a lonely man
waved a wand back and forth.
He bought me two hotdogs so I'd leave
the game early.
The man who played the violin got one potato. The other
got none.
His stepmother took his soup away
and gave it to the fat boy.
A boy stood in the distant doorway with an apple
in his hand.
He went to the suburb where
they judge your lawn.
There were no tattoo parlors, but everyone
had one.
He had silk shirts and wide ties
before it was fashionable.

The skin was so thin a light could shine
through.
He learned a new word every day. Imagine
his vocabulary when he was forty.
Shoes were left before the gate, a disposal
problem of major proportion.
He bought so many shoes, that even now,
many remain in unopened boxes.
An elf walked onto a plank and said,
"it's a shorter jump for me."
He said that 90 inch drapes were 89 inches long.
That one inch made America rich.
The smell wrapped round the universe, as Churchill
and Roosevelt puffed cigars.
A bedspread named for a President sold
for sixteen fifty.

The smoke was the color of cream, beautiful,
costly, facial cream.
He bought 6 pairs of identical sneakers
for two dollars apiece.
A man stood up and discussed Voltaire while
two corpses clapped out loud.
He bought a Cadillac. He said
he got a good deal.
A man traded a Faberge egg for an
orange. The orange was stale.
He sold our home to a guy on the train. It became
quite valuable later on.
Centipedes had an extra leg, and the yard
was full of unborn children.
He hated cats. I always thought
mine ran away.

A crocus was lit by the moonlight and a fly flew
over the universe between two eyebrows.
When I was 15 I met a 25 year old with half a brain.
They left in the part that forgives.
The casket was the size of the ancient temple
and people lay in layers.
When he wouldn't pay me enough I sold 300
dictionaries.
There were 12 apostles, 3 wise men, one virgin
and only one Jew. Judas.
He bought Penn Central for six, and sold
at three.
Three fish swam in a school. That's all
that was left.
Did you know he shortened his name by one syllable
the year I was born?

Crickets chirped one at a time. One
at a time. One at a time.
A pancreas cancer starts with one cell
which refuses to die.
Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Wagner — blame them,
they're all dead.
I worked in our textile store once a week
until I finished medical school.
Questions were posed after the facts, and the facts
were altered every day.
I never questioned why I went into Oncology
until that day.
A child asks four questions on Passover. It takes
3000 years to answer.
You asked me why I treated him.
Don't ask!

The Passover story is backwards. The angel
of death smote the Almighty.
When I said it was pancreas cancer his silence
filled our mouths to the brim.
The philosopher asked about the noise a falling tree makes
in the forest. Who cares?
There's a sign on the corner of Grand and Eldridge
with his name.
The town of Sambor used to be in Poland. Now it's
only in my memory.
His obituary was in the New York Times,
of course.
The ground is filled with a million moles who'll all
come out on Groundhog Day.
Put it this way, am I supposed to only
care for strangers?

THE BOY GHOST

For years we weren't children exactly
but small birds, our look
almost intelligent, as though the long hallways
could be maneuvered as easily as trees
any afternoon. Slow, that classroom, full
of arithmetic and thick lead
in pencils. Slow the door
as it opened to the
quick crying hinge — no one touched it, I swear —
the nun in her billowing black —
Children, Robert's come — the chalk
mid-air, her arm raised
like a saint's in a picture. The sky outside,
cloud and dark and thunder there.
Straight ahead we looked
and drifted, trained to love our secrets
so secretly. But to watch her eyes
was to watch him moving —
the boy ghost, slow motion, taking his time
past the high bookcase, past our little desks, poor thing
all-made-of-light, poor thing
in that old woman's head that refused to lose itself
out the small leak in her memory
where everything else was going: the names of things,
our names.
Spring, and so many windows open
in spite of the storm. Which one
would the dead boy choose? What shape
is a ghost or an angel? This lens
he would slip through to fly invisible and perfect and huge —

we believed nothing and we
believed this, equally; the forsythia
quietly dashing its yellow fringe
against screen and glass.
Our teacher stood there,
she hadn't moved.
Such wind, the trees
blurring, bent with it.

UP IN AIR

the plane's all insect intelligence,
the drone and spit of it
in the girls' murmuring three rows up:
the class trip
to Salt Lake. In a minute, they'll
rise and take pictures of each other, shooting
goofy or sweet,
whatever self-consciousness brings
in its instant, stilled bouquet.

Miles below, farms
but no one's working them.
A gate hangs on one hinge, geese land
hundreds at once, in trees.
Don't listen to this. Romance —
half lie, half wish. Not a fencepost
is visible. Up here, one imagines it.

I mean, even the baby beside me
is all blank curiosity, rattling
his keys. Dumb luck
for the dentist and his dentist friend,
and their wives across the aisle —
Oh bountiful country
of a billion rotting teeth.
And now, the tired stewardess is here
and here and here. She's
all business, she's blurry.
Whatever's secret
remains secret, furious years
come to nothing
in this low white noise. But surely

everyone's had a childhood,
and that lake back there
where someone drowned,
and the gate
hanging crooked, and the geese,
well, they're sad too,
and ancient and brand-new.
The coffee cart, it barely fits

the narrow aisle
and the dentists shine, so happy
with decision: cream or not, sugar?
no sugar. One invents
and lying back, uninvents: *Dissolve*
Return *Do not assume.*

Below us, by now — Utah.
Below Utah, molten ore.
And still the plane — that roar is constant,
meaning fragile, meaning
about to change.

SOME HUGE PAGEANT

James Tate, **Selected Poems** (Wesleyan, 1991)

I had first thought to make this a dual-subject review-essay, covering James Tate's *Selected Poems* and John Ashbery's new long poem, *Flow Chart*. Several factors, however, have made me decide to concentrate on Tate alone. One is the current state of reviewing, where coverage is very thin. Ashbery has been fairly widely reviewed, even if rather superficially in most instances, because he suddenly achieved star status some years back and can't be overlooked. Tate's *Selected*, on the other hand, which seems to me equally interesting and worthy of notice, has been almost completely neglected by reviewers.

My second reason has to do with length. Brilliant as *Flow Chart* is, it does not seem to have occurred to Ashbery, or to any of his reviewers, that it might have benefited from some editing. It's beautifully produced, but it runs 216 rather full pages, and not many readers, I suspect, will read it all the way through. That may not be a problem, given the fact that Ashbery is as useful for dipping into as he is for sequential reading, but having struggled recently to try, once again, to read through James Merrill's huge poem, and having found Ashbery excessive before, I worry a bit about whether we may fall into worship of the gargantuan and the prolix in our literature, forgetting the lyric poem's origins in song and falling for that old American tendency to think that bigger is better. I have liked some long poems very much — I testified in these pages last year to my admiration for Charles Wright's *The World of the Ten Thousand Things* and I've just finished a book-length poem of my own (not, however, 216 pages) — but I also admire the way Charles Simic gets in and gets out of poems so nimbly. I rejoice in the economies of Creeley, in Merwin's control of suggestion, in Nancy Willard's way with understatement, in the quickness of Frank O'Hara, to name a few poets with a variety of agendas, influences and styles. Part of my emphasis here, then, will be on Tate's brevity and efficiency and the value they repre-

sent, especially on the current scene. I should add that I'm not using Tate as a stick to beat Ashbery or anybody else. Both Ashbery and Merrill deserve their fame and attention. But does Tate deserve his neglect? Or having his work dismissed for its economies as well as for its humor and play? I guess my point is partly that Ashbery's "major" status is based on long poems, as though those protected him from a dismissive response to the "decadent" play with language and meaning that is at the center of his work. Being clearer about the meaning and value of Tate's poetry may help to clarify the real worth of Ashbery's, which for me does not lie in his habits of excessive talkiness but in his daring experiments with syntax and meaning, his clowning, if I may introduce a metaphor that I now want to explore more fully.

Consider the clown. What he represents is usually expressed without language and outside language, as if in defiance of its authority and pervasiveness, so it is interesting to ask what clowning with language might turn out to mean. Our literary clowns — Russell Edson comes to mind, along with Tate — tend to go unappreciated, though Ashbery and Simic have won some deserved recognition. Even there, though, critical discourse seems to be uneasy in the presence of the clowning; there's a tendency to want to look past it, to ignore it, to get Jack back in the box. The critic as ringmaster can control the presentation of the animal acts and trapeze artists; when the clowns arrive, a primitive energy breaks loose, and authority must retire. I suppose this sounds like I'm working off a Freudian model, but the implications are just as social as they are psychological. One can invoke the carnivalesque as readily as the id.

Clowns reflect our precarious lives and meanings in very grotesque ways, using make-up, costume, exaggerated gesture. They expose our indignity and confusion, representing us in those roles — lover, parent, citizen — that make us most vulnerable. The resulting routines can turn pain into laughter. An effective clown operates at the intersection where individuality is threatened by its own absurdity and crushed by history and circumstance. Oddly enough, that is the same intersection where litera-

ture is created. Both poets and clowns, we might say, operate in a universe they are helpless to change, with the result that their triumphs are small, pathetic and of course quite temporary.

The existential potency that links clowns and literature was recognized by Beckett, who took a logical step that had been anticipated by Joyce. From the vantage point of something like *Waiting for Godot* it is possible to turn round and appreciate the meaning of the clown more fully. One thinks of Fellini's wonderful film about them, and the analyses of Chaplin and Keaton that have emerged in recent years. The discussion of clowns and of the silent film artists who adapted their resources and routines has given us a discourse that begins to get at their strangeness and fascination. A great clown is both attractive and frightening; Harry Langdon and Emmett Kelly inspire tenderness and affection, yet we recognize their tendency to unleash frightening forces and devastating circumstances. The clown may even be made to embody these forces, as in the cult movie, *Killer Klowns from Outer Space.*

Now let us consider clowning with language. Note that the meanings released by exaggeration, by laughing in and through pain, and by the simplified and lyrical representation of our helpless condition, might be adapted to poetry. I open my *Selected Poems* of Tate at random and find this:

SENSITIVE EARS

It's a tiny noise
like that of eyeliner being applied
like a twenty-year-old smell coming back
to haunt you in a dream
it's the new house
it must be the old house
only this time it enters
through the ears
what a strange odor!
like an entire New Year's Party
shoved down a laundry chute
like waking up from an automobile accident

twenty years older!
and I keep sleeping in the basement
to get away from it
I'm in the treetops
listening to it circle
and I hear a mule puff its last sigh
I can't shut off this wheezing
there's a noise crouched under that leaf
I'm a flea with a thousand microphones
for eyes.

(p. 140)

It's hard to explain a poem like this (it's from the 1976 volume, *Viper Jazz*) to someone who doesn't find it instantly funny and liberating. Many of its characteristics — the tendency to think by means of analogies, the representation of a central, perceiving self of great sensitivity, obsessed by the past and exploring the unconscious — are quite familiar to readers of poetry, but the way in which it sends up poetry's tendency to excessive seriousness leaves a reader uncertain as to how to take it. If one is just amused, has one missed something? If one starts to explain analogies and allusions — Proust, Rip van Winkle — one feels ponderous and self-conscious. If one identifies a subject — insomnia — one feels one has limited the poem unduly. Its organization, using the house and its perimeters, is very pleasing, but it is also a kind of trick; the brilliant central metaphor, a party shoved down a laundry chute, is so extravagant that we can't ignore its status, can't lose ourselves in it. We respond to it, but we also stand aside from it, noting its ostentatious cleverness, while feeling that our criticism has been invited, anticipated, planned for. The same is true for the delightful flea/eyes/microphones image at the close.

The clowning metaphor may be helpful here because it is as if the poet has caricatured the sensibility of his profession and its specialized uses of language. It resembles the way clowns have noses and ears and feet that mimic ours but are also outsized or grotesque. Thus a kind of duality pertains; clowns have human characteristics but they also comment on them, distance them-

selves from them in order to show us their absurdity. And our laughter releases us from ourselves, momentarily. In comparable fashion, Tate gives us a poem about a sensitive insomniac, making brilliant, inventive comparisons to portray, define and analyze his condition, and at the same time pokes fun at such portraits by exaggerating, making it larger than life, exposing its self-preoccupied absurdity. The result is a critique of language *by* language, not so much a meta-language as language demonstrating, through clowning, its own instability, its limits, the paradoxical operation by which the effort to communicate keeps leading to misunderstanding and isolation. But perhaps I am straying too far from the page, where all this happens. Let me follow the clown-persona, if I may call him that for the moment, across to the facing page in Tate's *Selected* and his next utterance:

A VOYAGE FROM STOCKHOLM TO TAKE ADVANTAGE
OF LOWER PRICES ON THE
FINNISH ISLAND OF ÅLAND

Out through the frosty archipelago
card-players, morning beer-drinkers.
parsimonious housewives
and Nick Carter readers:

the derelict bum
seems to have a universe
of oddities folded, wrapped, stashed
in his filthy bag:
his tireless attention
to a thousand scraps of paper.

Someone hums a love song
while the others sleep.
No matter how far he might travel
his secret story is written somewhere,
in the generous air, in the distance.

A little patch of sky between suburbs,
about the size of a football field,
or maybe it's a dusty parkinglot,
sees him waving, and is reminded of; —
and in the distance, the distance . . .

(p. 141)

The "reality base" of this poem is larger than in a lot of Tate's work. He gives us a subject and setting in his title and first two stanzas. We may glimpse in the travelers of the first stanza and the more closely examined bum of the second stanza deliberate reflections of the sensibility that is shaping the poem. The journey is being undertaken in company; there are possible companions here in the strangeness of reality. But the bum is obsessed with his scraps of paper and the speaker/poet lapses into solitary meditation. Notice how the "he" of the third stanza's third line could theoretically be the bum, the someone who hums a love song, or the narrator who has presumably titled and organized the poem. It doesn't really matter. We all want our story told, want it written somewhere, even if it's just on a thousand scraps of paper; we want to overcome the distance that of course will always remain the distance. It's as though we tried to change the meaning of the word and, in the attempt, took a pratfall.

The poem's wistful comedy does indeed remind one of moments in Beckett, in Simic, other clowns of skill and note. I like the way the syntax behaves, or misbehaves, in the fourth stanza, putting us to the task of figuring out the subject of the verb "sees" and the reason for the football field and parking lot comparison/confusion. I would say that language is again asserting itself as a subject here; the speaker is among people who speak Swedish, people for whom the words for all this might be quite different. One might not know a football field from a parking lot. One might not be able to say what one is reminded of, at a literal loss for words. Again, it seems worth pointing out how ably and subtly Tate has found ways to heighten the meaning by heightening the absurdity and comedy, protecting himself from self-

indulgence or self-pity, writing both the poem a more soulful or less alert poet might have written and a sort of simultaneous shadow-poem, clown-poem, a comic sidekick, a Sancho Panza, antidote and counterfoil.

Maybe, a clown's thesis runs, we are all really like this. Maybe, Tate's poems suggest, we always walk this line between sense and nonsense, communication and non-communication. Maybe our hilarious tragedy can be acted out both by simulating normal behavior and by exaggerating it to expose its frailty, its abrupt limits. I reopen my *Selected Poems*, again at random, and find myself a few pages on in the *Viper Jazz* section, facing this:

ON THE SUBJECT OF DOCTORS

I like to see doctors cough.
What kind of human being
would grab all your money
just when you're down?
I'm not saying they enjoy this:
"Sorry, Mr. Rodriguez, that's it,
no hope! You might as well
hand over your wallet." Hell no,
they'd rather be playing golf
and swapping jokes about our feet.

Some of them smoke marijuana
and are alcoholics, and their
moral turpitude is famous: who gets to see
most sex organs in the world? Not
poets. With the hours they keep
they need drugs more than anyone.
Germ city, there's no hope
looking down those fire-engine throats.
They're bound to get sick themselves
sometime; and I happen to be there
myself in a high fever
taking my plastic medicine, seriously
with the doctors, who are dying.

(p. 148)

A stand-up comedian could deliver this, a sentence at a time, pausing for laughs, mugging or being deadpan, and be paid well for the trouble. On the page it feels different, requiring a little more effort and imagination from the reader, leading to something that is serious as well as funny (why did we ever allow those words to get lined up as opposites?), something that emerges clearly at the end. Very deadpan. Here's a bedpan. Our most imaginative comedians, improvising, people like Jonathan Winters and Steve Martin, are poets too. Tate knows this, but does, say, Helen Vendler know this? Probably not.

Every poet risks something, working at that intersection of self, language and historical/social/psychological oppression. Some risk pomposity, others risk grandiloquence, preciousness, egotism, self-pity. Tate's risk is triviality. The doctor poem can be amusing one moment and just silly, a collection of easy doctor-jokes and medical clichés, the next. It depends on the reader and on the moment of reading, where fragile elements like mood and attitude prevail. All literature has such dependencies, no doubt, but short comic poems seem particularly to exist at the mercy of our whims of dismissal. We can not only ask why we should be asked to take the thing seriously; we can ask why anyone should find it amusing. It blows away like a tumbleweed.

The defense against the charge of triviality, perhaps, is that it may well be our own, or our language's and our culture's; the poem simply mirrors our shallow attitudes toward doctors, illness, money, and dying. In terms of the metaphor I've been exploring: clowns are silly because we are silly. Clowns are irrelevant because they are uncomfortably relevant.

Meanwhile, Tate's range is very considerable. He can use understatement, for example, in a way that draws us into the creating of connections and the fleshing out of a world:

POEM

Language was almost impossible in those days
as we know it now and then.

When you tell me about your operation
I hear you and I don't hear you.

Wind gathers behind a barn:
torches are lit, men whisper.

One wears a hat and is very serious
about the war in his bedroom.

"Does it seem like I am sleeping all the time?"
Ask me another question.

Look, Ma, I found something beautiful today
out in the forest, it's still alive . . .

(p. 159)

This is a kind of poetry kit. Each couplet stands up well alone, facing several directions at once; examine the second one, for example, where opposite meanings — "you are a bore," versus "empathy is important but difficult" — face off in a comical, resonant way, and where language, mentioned in the first couplet, continues to be an issue in the foreground. But exactly how does the first stanza connect to the second, and then how does the second, in turn, take us to the third? Each reader will make slightly different decisions about this. The freedom of interpretation that Tate has built in harks back to Williams. The resulting comedy is comparatively low-key in relation to some of Tate's other work.

Here is something a little more extravagant:

A JANGLING YARN

Anonymous captive of the pensive habit,
drowsy in my spool of soda,
dank husk of neglected choruses,
I hear the footsteps of the postman
a thousand miles away: He speaks
of trifles, and is often, by his own admission,
unemployed. I am spying on his bloodstream

as a can of darkness pours over my head.
I'm hostile in baggy trousers.
O miniscule thermometer, naked bulb of pain,
I suffocate in your embrace.
Upheaval of chaste embroidery,
I fear your insignificance
and this reminder of what's to come.

Pangs and tears, I tend, I spoon,
and tears tend to make me lose interest.
My landlady, with toothpicks in tune,
sweeps this alarming leaf into her gutter,
her waist crumbling in large blocks
which a hired truck will collect later.
What further news from the world? Winking,

hissing, creaking, you, grimace, you, sheave
of scissoring cadenzas. I must wake now
into masquerade and particle, act out
my fluffy monologue behind the parrot green
tapestry, lisp some sparkling caprice:
It is Carnival again in the world, and I must try
to harmonize with its proud or shabby downfall.

It's possible to construct a scenario here — someone is awakened by the arrival of the mailman, goes through his mail, looks at the world around him, and rather reluctantly assumes the waking state — but it must be tentative because so many of the referents (e.g. what is a "spool of soda"?) are obscure. If we are to enjoy the poem, we must learn to delight in the irresponsibility of the language-user who speaks it, his extravagance and indeterminacy. Like Humpty-Dumpty in *Through the Looking Glass*, he wants to make his own verbal universe, somewhere between solipsism and community, dreaming and waking. That he should see the world as Carnival, full of masquerade, celebration, partying while playing with disguises, makes perfect sense. It's the one way he can let himself enter the world, grudgingly, but determined to have some

fun, foreseeing the downfall of everything (did any poem ever bespeak apocalypse more mildly?) but not knowing whether it will be "proud or shabby."

The fun is partly in the speculation. Can we enter the way this speaker chooses his signifiers in a fashion that will allow us to develop confidence in interpreting him? Does his landlady, for instance, chew a toothpick as she sweeps or does she have very skinny legs? Having both possibilities must be more fun than having only one, and having no safe way to choose between them teaches us a lesson about the thin ice we skate around on all the time. It is a fluffy monologue indeed that we all speak, so we need not be afraid of thunderous puns — waist/waste — or overt declarations of the clown-persona, who may be "hostile in baggy trousers" because he's still in his pajamas, but who certainly sounds like a dour clown at this point, a frowning pantaloon from inner space. Try reading this poem out loud in the voice of W. C. Fields. When you get to "Winking, // hissing, creaking, you, grimace, you, sheave / of scissoring cadenzas," try looking in the mirror. This is a poem-kit too, and it has some funny make-up and a banana skin or two.

Tate has put his *Selected Poems* together by keeping between one half and one third of the contents of each of nine volumes. He does not revise and he sticks to the order in which the poems appeared in their original volumes. The selection from *Reckoner* is an exception, scrambling the original order somewhat, but even there poems tend to be grouped in clusters that reflect their original ordering. The selections from his first two books are on the generous side, probably because those are the hardest to find. In general, I find I have no quarrel with his tendency to leave poems alone, keeping their original state and sequence, and I admire and agree with his choices of which poems to keep. Any reader of Tate will probably find some favorites omitted — e.g., I missed "Once I Was Young in the Land of Baloney," "The Gentle Beckendorfs," "Vallejo," and "On the Chinese Painter/Poet Wu Hui" — but that is inevitable. What is important is that the book feels so capacious and reads so fluently.

A selection that covers nine books and some twenty-five

years inevitably raises the question of development and change. What must be said in Tate's case, I think, is that there is less of that than in most poets. We are probably too anxious about such matters, wanting artists to have phases and periods, to mature and deepen, so that we can follow and describe their so-called progress. Tate may have been ignored or dismissed by some critics because they cannot narrate his artistic career, reading his work against his life and vice versa, getting round behind him and second-guessing him. But this is a poet who discovered the size, shape and meaning of his talent early, and who, like Edson or Beckett, stays committed to the verbal equivalent of his costume, routines, vocabulary and general intransigence. It is certainly true that Tate's skill and range have quietly improved over the years, and that maturity has probably brought a deeper dimension to his tragicomic vision. But it is also true, and reading the *Selected Poems* confirms it, that he is a kind of constant in a fickle culture, too subversive to be touched by fads and circumstances. He is looking to be timely in his reflection of our linguistic and cultural instabilities, but he is also looking to be timeless, or outside of time. And that's the clown's trick too. Clown and poet both work at that curious intersection I spoke of, where everything seems to break down under the pressure of absurdity and the failures of language, and they triumph there, making something out of nothing, or nearly-something out of nearly-nothing. I like what Tate himself has said about this recently, in a little statement he wrote for the Fifth Edition of the reference work, *Contemporary Poets* (St. James Press):

> . . I am trying to combine words in such a way as to lend a new life, a new hope, to that which is lifeless and hopeless. If the vision in the poems is occasionally black, it is so in order to see more clearly the fabric of which that blackness is made, and thereby understand the source. If the source is understood, there is the possibility of correcting it.
>
> In my poems it seems one of the recurring themes must be the agony of communication itself: despair and hatred are born out of this failure to communicate. The poem is man's noblest effort because it is utterly useless.

This is as straightforward and purposeful as anyone could wish, but the paradoxes that lurk just below the surface — darkness for better vision, nobility born of useless effort — help alert us to the reasons why the artistic program that works to find life and hope in the lifeless and hopeless, and that spares us no truth about the agonies of communication, should take the particular form that it does in Tate's poems. Surreal, outlandish, unpredictable, constantly risking madness and chaos, they teach us Socratically, as it were, who we are and what problems we have. That they should do so with such dexterity and economy is, I've been arguing, additional cause for admiration. I hope that my clown analogy has not done this poet an injustice. It was not meant to lessen the importance or value of his ways with language, but to clarify and celebrate them. I'll let the poet himself have the last word, but I invite the reader to observe the rapidly shifting discourse in this passage, and the emotional crosscurrents it raises. The first two lines could be from George Herbert. The anecdote that follows hedges its bets about heroism, but is ultimately both idealistic and hardheaded. Behind the black comedy, as Tate himself admits, lies a serious and steadfast purpose:

> . . . My weary and blossoming Soul
> was passed from hand to hand to hand.
> I was resting in the center of some huge pageant
> when a human standing next to me said:
> "There must be more," and set out to find it
> against all odds, against the known sum.
> And years later, either came back or didn't,
> was the biggest fool ever, or shines there
> on the horizon, like a newly minted coin of hope.

(from "Thoughts While Reading *The Sand Reckoner*," p. 237)

David Young

THE CLEAR HEAD AND THE RAGING HEART

Mary Stewart Hammond, **Out of Canaan** (Norton, 1991)

Out of Canaan is a book of poems so intricately woven that it becomes one poem. The narrative that weaves these twenty-nine poems into one concerns the family of a Protestant clergyman in the South, a man who enjoys humiliating his wife and beating his children for the health of their souls and the love of himself. He has four children, three boys and one girl. The girl and the youngest boy are rebels, and eventually both escape to different lives in different cities. When the father moves to the city the boy has escaped to, the boy commits suicide. But the daughter has gone to a larger city and married a congenial northern man. She is happy in her freedom, but even as she rejoices in it she realizes that one cannot exorcise one's heritage or kin any more than one can exorcise one's self. This poetry is dense, not suitable for skimming, not a coffee table book, but one that engrosses readers so much that they lose track of any small talk going on around them. We are in a theater completely absorbed by the zest of a good play.

Such a play occurs complete in the opening poem, "Saving Memory." Two children have laid a penny on the railroad track to flatten it. The stage is the platform; the scene is set ("Mountains surrounded us, middling high and purple"). The eyes and ears and tactile sensations of the audience move from distant to near ("the station was quiet enough for crickets," "You can hear the train in the rails./They're round, not flat, as you'd expect,/and slick"). The antics of the two children raise the tension as if in a series of miniature scenes, and the audience, in effect, both stands on the platform beside them and holds its breath for them. The last stanza is the climax. The train rushes past, the engineer tooting in terror, and the children barely throw themselves back in time, "all the perspective curved,/curved and gone." Both the title and the ending which speaks of perspective link this poem with the main theme that weaves the book together, the need to risk self-destruc-

tion in order to free the self. It also implies that only the young will try so hard and perhaps that no one, when older, will find that total freedom is possible or even desirable:

SAVING MEMORY

Summer nights we put pennies on the track.
Even the station was quiet enough for crickets.
Mountains surrounded us, middling high and purple.
No matter where we stood they protected us
with perspective. People call them gentle mountains
but you can die in there; they're thick
with creeper and laurel. Like voodoo,
I drew pictures with a sparkler. A curved line
arcked across the night. Rooted in its slope,
one laurel tree big as the mountain holding it.

You can hear the train in the rails.
They're round, not flat, as you'd expect,
and slick. We'd walk the sound, one step, two,
slip, on purpose, in the ballast, hopscotch
and waltz on the ties, watching the big, round eye
enter the curve and grow like God out of the purple,
the tracks turning mean, molten silver blazing
dead at us. We'd hula. Tango. And the first
white plume would shoot up screaming long, lonely,
vain as Mamma shooing starlings from her latticed pies.
Sing Mickey Mouse, the second scream rising long, again,
up and up. Stick our right hip out, the third
wailing. Give it a hot-cha hot-cha wiggle, the fourth
surrounding us. Wrists to foreheads, bid each other fond
adieus, count three, turn our backs, and flash it a moon,
materializing, fantastic, run over with light,
the train shrieking to pieces, scared, meaning it,
short, short, short, short, pushing a noise
bigger than the valley. It sent us flying,
flattened, light as ideas, back on the platform,

the Y6B Mallet compound rolling through
southbound, steamborne, out of Roanoke.

It wasn't to make the train jump the track
but to hold the breath-edged piece of copper
grown hot with dying, thin with birth,
wiped smooth of origin and homilies.
To hold such power. As big as the eye
of the train, as big as the moon burning
like the sun. All the perspective curved,
curved and gone.

Unfortunately, while the audience is immersed in the play, reviewers must step outside the theater and break the spell, but they can still whet the appetite of those who haven't yet had the full pleasure of reading the book. We can describe our own pleasure, for example, in reading a poem that actually giggles its way through a basically serious theme:

COSMETICS

. . . *see the music, hear the dance.*—GEORGE BALANCHINE, 1904-1983

Cremation? Honey, you've got to be kidding.
Where I come from we lay them out, paint their faces
with the cosmos, and fling back the lid. Some people
believe in the resurrection of the body.
The one you're in. You're not coming back
as Marilyn Monroe. But you are coming back. Worms
steer wide of Christians. . . .

This poet's humor can also become a weapon. In "Jesus Rum," for example, she parodies the father who parodies the Twenty-Third Psalm for his own selfish purposes. In the next stanza she parodies the same psalm to discredit him.

You began unbuckling,

saying, *Fear not,*

for I am with you; My rod and My staff,
My wallet and My pity, shall comfort her, for I am
buying her all that she wants; I am feeding
her righteousness for your own good;
this hurts Me more than you but you
asked for it; you will not listen; you will not
do as I say; if you wish to speak to her again
you will speak My language, for I am creating her
in My own image to serve you right,
for not going to church, for turning
to heathens when you had God, or Me;
I am restoring her soul; I am leading her into
My pastures, for the Fifth Commandment really means
only parents worthy of being honored should be honored;
she shall not want for anything; I'll teach you
a lesson you'll never forget; I'll get you
back into the fold; I'll show you what for!

My collapse, I am told, just goes to prove
I'm a poor loser. And no Christian. Or else
I'd get back on my feet and come with her, cleave
unto the father, unto the daughter, forever,
prop both of them up. Yea, his belt and coiled logic
have followed me all the days of my life.

A reviewer can also enjoy describing how twenty-nine poems become one, not by just plain chronological narrative, but by flashing back and forth from childhood to middle age and from the main character to parallel characters in other places, times, and walks of life, who have undergone the same struggle for the same freedom, the same defeats and false triumphs, such as Nefertiti come to life in the twentieth century and trying to outrun her past:

we can imagine her befuddlement when
she turned up instead, above ground

among the Christians, a tourist—
as who isn't in the first months back—
standing with prison pallor in the sand
outside her summer pyramid in shorts
and a pair of Jellies from Latin America.

And the old school friend in "Juncture" brooding about her daughter (a teenage alcoholic hospitalized for treatment), who is depressed by possibilities of her own guilt:

At dinner, in candlelight,
we lift our glasses, hesitate. *No*, one hardly drinks
to Julia, hospitalized for treatment, a teenage alcoholic,
even though leukemia might give her better odds.
Your mother, too, goes without saying.
Our husbands save the moment: "To Edith Hamilton,
Greek scholar, revisionist, founder of the school

that brought you two together."

And the dying Nantucket mother-in-law in "Second Sight," who can't remember her husband's (?) name. She felt and welcomed

the return to her side of some man in green trousers
who, maybe, was, and, maybe, wasn't, a likeness
of the man in green trousers in the silver frame
on her bureau. Such a comfort he was,
although she couldn't think why. Nor
could she think why she'd be so queer
as to have a photograph of a stranger.

Even more effective in avoiding a too linear narrative than these parallel characters are the voices of the poet herself, as she exhorts, in "Cosmetics," "O, Georgians, push up from the diaphragm" and "Unbelievers, it's hands, not feet we paint/to match the face," or the sudden break into dialect in "Positive Thinking":

Greatest hospital on earth say
Mom wrong. I call to tell her. I say,
"Mom, you wrong, I have proof.
Pages and pages of proof. Many lab report.
I not malignant. I benign."
"That the power of prayer," she say.

Still another pleasure in reviewing *Out of Canaan* is to watch the poet use her knowledge of history, literature, music, art, and rhetoric, not as ornament, but as tools for developing tone. To understand "Heirlooms Lost," for example, a reader must know *Paradise Lost*, the craft of jewelry making, and all the positions in ballet. One must also know the Bible in detail. To enjoy "Having Words, or, Life in the Backyard," one must be familiar with the outlaws of Western movies. In any one poem one must expect scientific technical terms and slang, family pet names and names of Greek and Italian masters, bits of French and Latin, Victorian songs and rock and roll, and place names now extinct or not even on the map. This habit of pouring into any poem specific names, places, times, dialects, and crafts, as well as any word from distant lands or literatures, is necessary to create this poet's speed, ironic humor, and emotional intensity; but knowing that such plenty may close out readers used to generalizations or clichés, she provides some details in each poem that are familiar enough to cue the readers to the situation. In "Having Words, or, Life in the Backyard" readers will recognize what sort of child could think of herself as Texas Lil, who gives orders to Dead-Eye Dal and Chief Walking Bull and any snake-in-the-grass varmint, even if they miss the pun on Eaton Nothing. In "The Promised Land," when the poet describes the younger brother's suicide, the reader is made to cope with the Hepplewhite, Erich Maria Remarque's *Heaven Has No Favorites*, a red MG TC, and a man named Dallas; but the poet also tells the reader that Dallas is the name of her brother, that the Hepplewhite table is the familiar family dining table, that the unfamiliar book by Erich Maria Remarque was popular a long time ago, and that the MG TC was a red car.

Finally, it is Hammond's craft that especially delights this re-

viewer, the surprise of the perfect word where only an accurate word is expected, such as gulls "sledding across the wind" or "a braid/of complicated notes" ("Slow Dancing in the Living Room: Thanksgiving") or "terminal excusitis/dementia" and "Prince Charming/in the missionary position" ("Nefertiti") or ballerinas "bending heaven, fingers flicking it away, legs/hyphenating space" ("Cosmetics").

It is also her care that makes Hammond's sounds and rhythms create exactly the tone she needs. "Heirlooms Lost," for example, answers Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The poet uses Milton's long, heavily enjamed sentences (this poem of eighteen four-line stanzas contains only seven end-line periods, four of which are in the first three stanzas). She uses lines of approximately equal length and both internal and external slant rhymes, even occasional full rhymes, which, though the poem is not in iambic pentameter, are a convincing modern equivalent. And she ends the poem with a descending cadence that Milton would have approved:

> Only the narrow dividing of the carpets' pile,
> parting and closing, betrayed the creature's glide
> through the Persian flora and fauna, filching not only
> objects passed honorably from generation to generation,
>
> but, not valuing that her people were American glass
> and easily broken, also bearing, with her slide
> into the crack of light spilling under her door,
> cousins, family, myth, the whole paradise of blindness.

It is only fair that a reviewer admit her criteria for judging books. Mine are random personal choices I made in the 1960s and 70s: a preference for understatement, complexity of vision and character, serious ironies treated with laughter and wit, a compressed line, rhythms of the human voice in all its moods, chunks of dramatic experience that imply, not explain, their meaning, even a fondness for surrealism. But underlying those merely stylistic preferences, the single real criterion for any poem's excellence is whether its readers come away from it angry or curious

or elated; in other words, whether or not they become involved in a dialogue with the poet. Mary Stewart Hammond involves me in such dialogue. She is copious (no minimalist), and she uses more overstatement than understatement, but she puts more action and complex characterization into her tightly compressed lines than most writers could get into a novel. Her stage-like way of presenting her material avoids the need to bore active readers and coddle lazy ones by prosaic explanations. Her readers must work toward her meanings, but the more they work, the more they ask and argue, and the more she argues back:

> How many of us holding hands, swaying on the wind
> in Alabama, boiled on the spray of fire hoses, singing
> "We Shall Overcome" in Washington with daffodils
> for bayonets, sure as shooting of the balm
> in Gilead, were also crooning, secret with hymns,
> for someone earlier than ourselves?

Who earlier than ourselves? You mean ritual is a physiological need?

> verbs "to be" and "to have";
> the day ahead unexplored and limited
> as a blank piece of paper;
> this prison;
> this absolute freedom.

Freedom a prison? Not for me. Or is it? Choice makes young kids cry.

> There's this ritual, like a charm,
> Southern women do after their men
> make love to them in the morning.
> We rush to the kitchen. As if possessed.
> Make one of those big breakfasts
> from the old days. To say thank you.

"Yes, yes, that's just how it was." This ability to achieve dialogue

with readers occurs in every poem I pick up and indicates that *Out of Canaan* is a very good book indeed.

I also have a hunch that it is a great book. The term is almost too subjective to use, even in a review. But after long consideration, my hunch still holds, that what makes this book great are that clear head and that ranging, raging heart.

In the following poem the clear head structures a dramatic narrative in which the raging heart laughs at its persecutors, with amusement and bite. It compresses abundance, startles with exact words too exact to expect; shocks, tweaks, soothes (while enjoying every minute), and ends with an imaginative leap that makes us wonder and argue:

OPEN SEASON

When a family is crippled, and hobbling along all lashed together, if one person gets orthopedic shoes, the rest will go ape-shit.

—WILLIAM MATTHEWS, in conversation

Postmark: Peterborough, NH, Oct. 25, 198__

The mailboxes here are open pigeonholes,
homemade yellow-pine crannies, oiled
with the rub of the near and the famous,
reaching. I want, first, to give you
the look of it, have you see how your letter
blessing my escape and wishing me poems
landed in this artists' sanctuary in the aftermath,
as you knew, of months of perfectly good words
flying off the family tongue so mean
blackbirds rolled upside down on the phone lines
playing 'possum from New York to Florida, words
flying so ugly they came back reincarnated as
black flies dancing from one wing to the other with
ink they can't hold any longer, so they don't,

bursting bold-faced in yellow cablegrams, all caps,
"YOUR DEEP-SEATED INFERIORITY
COMPLEX . . . ,"

foaming at the mouth of ball-point pens,
". . . proof of your twisted need to control. . . ,"
squirting from the nibs of fountain pens,
". . . demonstrated by the insult of your warped . . ."
psssting from behind plain brown wrappers,
". . . refusal to mind, forces us to do . . ."
licking the lead of their pencil stubs,
". . . you! know! what!"

without once remembering to unzip, when
all else failed, words, relieving themselves
in the tulips on Mantovani stationery, crooning,
"Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus," and
"Nobody Knows De Trouble I Seen."

You can see, in such a case, how kindness
might lean slant in a pigeonhole, might look
like one white wing waiting to flutter
when the fingers touched it, how it might seem thin
and still release the feathers family plucked,
how it might seem the juice of thigh meat
the aforementioned-whose-names-I've-forgotten sucked.

What you couldn't know because I bragged
how well all goes with poems here shielded
from family, was the way tears came, finally,
to slit open my nights and crows flew
from my belly pecking the eyes out of my dreams,
couldn't know sleep heaved the tombstones
covering the damned up to the surface,
and my fingers read their carved names
remembering, that then, I couldn't get sleep
back in the envelope, and if I didn't
there'd be no words for the A.M. and flies
on the living daylights, and I didn't, and
there weren't, and so on, you get the picture:

by the third week of putting so many
perfectly good words out of my mind,
I was crouched night and day in my head
not getting a bead on even a comma, when
here's your letter perched in my pigeonhole (easy,
sometimes a pigeonhole is just a pigeonhole),
and it's not taking a leak, it's practicing
continence, the first piece of mail in months
I don't have to put on a waterproof slicker to read
wiping my eyes with toilet paper. You can

imagine my loss of gravity holding a piece
of pure white 20 lb. Bond containing
no words to define me, the updraft
beholding perfectly good words not aiming
to thrash me, wing me, or, in lieu of
the direct hit, burgle, con, mastermind, or
erase me, just words, laundered of all trace
of the hustle associated with cement-shoe salesmen
looking for customers, words, again,
swift and translucent as a watercolor
drawing the paper's texture into the picture,
as a poem writes the white space, as
The Wall Street Journal clip you enclosed
"for inspiration," headlined "Wild Turkeys
Spot Hunters Before They Can Get Off A Shot"
flushed the poet under siege into takeoff:

Hunting for Words

Dateline: Turkey Mountain, USA, October 8, 198__

Writers are sleepless and empty-handed.
Words have become hard to flush as wild turkeys.
Worse, the ratio of words to writers has reached
one-to-one, and words are getting smarter.

Nature's way is to select against
the dumb bird. In some areas, words
have even stopped gobbling to avoid detection.
A word can spot a poet at 200 yards and —

with the footspeed of a sprinter and the ability
to fly 50 miles an hour — disappear in an instant.
Accordingly, some poets, insted of wearing
the Day-Glo colors worn by other writers
to keep from getting shot themselves, are going to
new lengths in camouflage: in quest of their
elusive quarry, they're signing up for workshops
and Bigger Game tutorials as never before,

with the Orvis system for bagging words,
complete with woodsy shooting galleries and
recorded turkey calls, being set out on upward of
400 campuses, where, to better their odds,
poets practice a noun's repertoire of clucks,
gobbles, and yelps and gather tips on
how to imitate fighting words by beating
arms against legs to lure curious verbs, while

three shotgun manufacturers have fashioned
specialized weapons with camouflaged slings
and no-shine barrels. It helps to be
a little crazy. Poets sit motionless
for hours, every sense alert, unable to think
about black flies, extortion rates, family,
moral runts, lunch, hoping for a few
precious seconds to take aim at a word.

They arise before dawn to call mating yelps
to words, who often wake up in the morning
with sex on their minds. And, poets who stalk,
rather than sit, learn to distinguish the word's
j-shaped droppings. Sadly, today's poets are in

greater peril than words are, what with armed poets
wearing camouflage sneaking up on other poets
wearing camouflage crouching armed and gobbling.

Of course, you and I know I am also the wild turkey
holed up in these woods, hard to flush as words, camouflaged
and getting smarter, the wild turkey family would kill
to get a bead on, the turkey losing her voice
to avoid detection. Today, the season opens
outside. Gunfire lands soft around the afternoon.

Your "regards" are tucked in my manuscript
but I want you to see all of us here, the way
we were last night, flocked in this sanctuary,
"family" and possible, listening by firelight to jigs
Andy Teirstein fiddled to Sister Bernetta's lilt,
all of us, whole and aloft, flying somehow
to a steady-enough beat on one wing,
the memory of the other moving
inside our paintings, our music,
our sculpture, the stories and poems,
this poem, this wing,
you sent, lent,

lifting me rising, soaring across the page,
until the remembered look of it, of kindness
leaning in a pigeonhole, crumples the sky under my hand,
pitching my gobble off-key, and I plummet, sobbing
like a human, so far does your instinct
for arriving at another's place
reach down into me, slant,
standing in for others.

Alberta Turner

YIELDING TO MYSTERY

Kathleen Peirce, **Mercy** (Pittsburgh, 1991)

Kathleen Peirce's first book begins with a familiar, even banal, image, which she characteristically transforms into something resonant and strange:

> It was late. A man was at his table
> with his tools: paintbrushes fashioned from the hairs
> of his hand, a clean pin
> tense in the vise. He began:
> The Last Supper on the head of a pin!
> Here's what the infinitesimal required of him:
> a concentrated slowing of his heart
> like a final string of sobs,
> and a naked, faulty eye. He suffered his enormity
> with grace, in the stillness of his pose. Touching
> one wet hair to the pin between heartbeats, he made
> Christ in a sky blue dress! Apostles!
> The cask of wine in a speck! The whole morning flew
> into his mouth with each colossal breath,
> or so it seemed to us, who stood outside
> in the larger world of bearing wind, and dust.

The poem is called "In Miniature," and it's an apt introduction to Peirce's quirky, exhilarating world. She uses an epigraph from "Little Gidding" ("Dust in the air suspended / Marks the place where a story ended. / Dust inbreathed was a house — / The wall, the wainscot and the mouse") to establish the twin themes of mortality and commemoration, against which she plays the goofy image of the man who paints the Last Supper on the head of a pin. But by taking the requirements of his enterprise seriously, she manages to transcend its inherent uselessness and to recast him as a figure of some authority and weight. She accomplishes this partly through the scrupulous delicacy of her phrasing ("Here's what the infinitesimal required of him"), partly through asking

the reader to imagine the magnitude of the task, to which the man's very corporality and vitality, the blood beating in his fingertips, are obstacles. The poem balances expertly on the edge between seeing him as a martyr to artistic discipline ("a concentrated slowing of his heart / like a final string of sobs") and acknowledging the silliness of his activity ("Christ in a sky blue dress!"), and a phrase like "He suffered his enormity / with grace" — in which "enormity" is both corporeal and metaphysical — goes in both directions at once. At the end of the poem there are two final shifts in perspective: first, the man's concentration and precision inflate him to "colossal" proportions, so that he seems to inhale the whole morning with each breath, and then he and his managed, scrupulous world are miniaturized again from the point of view of the "larger world of beating wind, and dust" from which he is isolated, and which would threaten the purity of his undertaking. Through these shifting perspectives the poem ultimately suspends its judgments, allowing its wry anecdote to suggest far more than it says about the nature of art, contingency, and mortality.

While the man in the poem is not exactly Peirce's self-portrait, she is in fact in many of these poems a miniaturist, painting tiny narratives of ordinary domestic life that in their clarity and attention to detail attain a haunting, numinous energy. Some are meditations on single objects, often from nature: a blooming amaryllis, a lungfish, woodpeckers, pigs, an overgrown garden. Often, however, the object serves as a springboard to sudden transcendence, to moments in which mysteries make sudden, unbidden appearances, as in this passage:

. . . I saw the face of a beaded evening bag,
minutest iridescent beads in rose and deeper rose,
and black. Someone stopped sewing
before being done, stopped at the fringe,
the most decorative part of the decorative thing. She left
the threaded needle in. What grief
was it, as those hours spent readying the rare occasion stopped,
the bag not done but not undone? One bead
is a beautiful thing. We won't all die at once. Hold one bead
in your hand and keep from thinking of the next one if you can.

That's the ending of a poem ("Object Tension") that begins with Mahler, a hibiscus, and Donatello's Magdalene, and yet the emotional and intellectual progress of the whole feels remarkably seamless and unforced. The surprise of the penultimate sentence here seems fully earned, given the complicated web of associations that precedes it. Metaphysical depths keep opening up through the activity of heightened perception, as Peirce seeks to dissolve the customary distinctions between spirit and matter, body and soul: "*Look, the soul is sensate, look how true things feel / when they're held.*" Her juxtapositions are often suffused with mystery, but they feel entirely plausible, imitating the way in which daily life is in fact full of such connections, as in "The Raptor Center," where the speaker experiences in turn an autopsy and then a visit to a wild bird hospital, and constructs from the two events a meditation on corporality. Life itself assembles these patterns, Peirce seems to suggest, once we yield ourselves to the astonishing mysteries of perception. Or in the words of another poem: "In this way things fit, says the brain, / flinging memory at the true."

Sometimes the revelations seem more purely psychological, as in this delicate, miraculous poem:

HIM

So far, all day, the road to Lake Darling
is empty. A flicker with a broken wing
steps down to cross. Now the driver
comes and sees. He stops, lifts
the bird up in his hand, which tightens
on its one question. Driving this way,
the man is directed to a woman who
can fix this, and he goes to her. That
evening, he tells his wife how the flicker felt
waiting in his hand,
the little orange on its head, feathers all
of-a-piece. In the next week, from inside, oh,
she sees her first flicker on the wobbling suet ball

and she tells him first thing, thinking, there,
something is done now, something has been passed
through, thinking her desire caused it, or
the flicker did, or him.

In a way nothing could be simpler than this tiny portrait of rescue and survival, and indeed the deadpan, faux-naif diction of the opening lines seems constructed to make us think so. Yet through a stunning economy the transference of its focus from the bird to the driver to the wife (whose poem it finally turns out to be) allows the richness of the experience to emerge, turning the poem into a resonant parable of need and transcendence. Again much more is implied than specified in the last few lines, whose rhythm suggests that the woman's concern for the bird is more than casual, that when the flicker appears on the suet ball ("wobbling" perfectly exemplifies Pierce's eye for detail) it represents something deeper, her own desire for healing or continuity, which is linked through the echo of the title to her relation to her husband. "Something has been passed / through," she thinks, and it's precisely in her inability to specify — and the poet's care not to impose definition on it — that the poignancy is released.

This sort of layering, building the unspoken simplications gradually as the poem proceeds, is one of the most distinctive qualities in Peirce's work. Another poem about saving a bird, for instance, gains a wholly other dimension from its title: "Elegy for Marion Peirce (— drowned at birth, June 30, 1949)." Nowhere is this death mentioned in the poem, but its ghostly presence imbues the meditation on the rescued "whale-colored" swift, "light as / light," with considerable tenderness. The multidimensionality, suspending several balls in the air at the same time, makes notable demands on readers, of course, but the resulting emotional rewards are considerable.

When Peirce works on a larger scale she maintains the same wonderful economy. Here's the beginning of a poem in which there's a surprise in every line:

THIS DECEMBER THEY WOULD SPEAK OF HAVING A CHILD

Twelve hollow paper apples
hang in a trance,
red, lacquered, in the tree-in-a-dish
whose legs he nailed against tipping.
The green tree towers, severed from the necessary,
brought in, lit, there with their two chairs.

In its sustained attention to a single object this opening feels more conventional than that of many of the poems, yet there is equally striking originality in its treatment. There's the same play of perspective in the shift from the miniaturizing "tree-in-a-dish" to "The green tree towers." The particularity of "*twelve* hollow paper apples" and the almost fetishized "hang in a trance, / red, lacquered" suggest a mythic scenario, which is counterpointed against the prosaic "whose legs he nailed against tipping." The ordinary domestic scene is defamiliarized through the ceremonial diction and cadence: the Christmas tree is "severed from the necessary, / brought in, lit, there with their two chairs." And all of these details are projected against the latent emotional scenario implied in the title but so far unexplored.

In the next stanza the poem becomes much more interior and meditative, its rhythms more associative and private:

The walk she takes: trip
along the boundary of the useful
farm, what a thin light, the road swinging
uphill its two directions, the slushy ruts. The hogs,
which come to something, watch her from their side.
She wants something to keep track of,
cuts into the picked cornfield,
the weak light is coming from behind her now,
the sticks at the creek bed mean something, something also
in bloom-time; chicory, indigobush, they keep her
from going in further, she feels she is being

watched by everything, she likes it,
the wet bent corn starts to look like bamboo, an owl starts
from a heavy tree, it fears her, she fears
it, how heavy the body in the act of love,
a bit more and the stick-poles rattle, quail are running,
gourd-shaped to the clearing, then they fly, too, chuckling,
toward the sound of a far-off engine, she has never gone so far,
the hills appear to be stuck in their swelling, the horizon looks
like a thing she could part, a pile of feathers
appears at her feet, hen pheasant's. The outermost
lasts, she thinks, how much a surface matters; feathers, husk,
eggshell, boot-on-a-shoe . . .
She gets back to her house
and its living room.

There is in Peirce's work an intuitive, visionary responsiveness to nature that can evoke Roethke or Plath, but here (as often elsewhere) the treatment of that relation seems utterly distinctive. Incidental pleasures are everywhere here: the precisely judged music of phrases like "the slushy ruts" and "the horizon looks / like a thing she could part," the surprises built into the line breaks ("trip / along the boundary of the useful / farm"), perhaps most strikingly the way the passage plays images of the landscape off against the woman's sometimes startling reactions to them ("she feels she is being / watched by everything, she likes it"). On a first reading the associations are likely to seem almost random, governed by the accidental progress of the woman's excursion; only gradually are we apt to notice how artfully woven it is to be psychologically suggestive. The hogs "come to something," the woman "wants something to keep track of," "the sticks at the creek bed mean something, something also / in bloom-time," and although (as in "Him") the "something" is carefully unspecified, there is nonetheless in the correspondence between inner and outer worlds an important implication about the woman's need for meaning, focus, connection. The most intuitive claim, the one least apparently connected to the isolated venture into the landscape, is of course "how heavy the body in the act of love," which

links us back to the relationship implied in the title. Still, the experience remains essentially private, even solipsistic, and when the woman "gets back to her house" (not "their house"), the mood stays decidedly somber.

In the final stanza the woman is still alone, but she achieves a powerful sense of resolution:

> She wanted so much
> for something to mean the same things just now:
> big triangle, little ball, two shapes of Christmas, yes?
> One apple hung wrong,
> hitched in its gold thread.
> She thought to fix it,
> then thought away. Just now she sees it again
> and sets it right. Its sealed simple form is hard in her hand,
> but light,
> as a thought of a thing,
> light, and look, recognizable.

The poem has taken time to assemble its parts, but here it brings them together in deft simplicity: the Christmas tree, "severed from the necessary," and the woman's quest for meaning come together in the single gesture of setting right the twisted apple. The "sealed simple form" echoes her earlier thought of "how much a surface matters," but she is also conscious of its lightness, its immanence and presence. Without referring to the relation to the absent "he," Peirce again allows us to see that "something has been passed / through," and that the woman has achieved a kind of answer. She is characteristically modest in her claims here, but the moment is nonetheless notably moving in its complexity and grace.

I'd like to quote one more poem to represent the strengths of this collection. Like many of the other poems it is assembled as a kind of collage — or better, as a mosaic, each piece fitting precisely into the pattern that is unexpected yet completely persuasive:

NEED INCREASING ITSELF BY ROUNDS

The way Lorene and I went back
For blackberries, the same hill
But hotter, the way I said
Doesn't that haze down there look like snow,
The way she said *no.*
The way we left the good canes
To the bottom of the hill, the way she climbed
Inside them like before, the way my kettle felt
Hanging on my waist, the way she'd brought two,
The way she kept turning in the same place,
The way the dollar was wet in my blouse, the way
The berries were swollen underneath, the way she pulled
Her hood up, the way her hands were, under the leaves,
The way I could only keep picking by thinking we were dying,
The way she kept talking when the plane went over, the way
She kept turning in the same place, the way the first few
Sounded in the second gallon bucket,
The way I had to toss her bucket over
The same way I gave the ditch a vase of zinnias
Every day, the way I had cut them, the way
The colors pom-pommed, the way their water smelled by evening,
The way I thought they couldn't hurt me, the way my husband
Sounded, sobbing in his sleep, a boy or a little horse getting bigger,
The way I glued the leg on the wooden horse again,
The left hind, the way it had been lying on its side too long,
The way the same place breaks, the way we seem to stop sleeping,
The way thorns work, the way sleep comes.

What's invigorating about this poem is the tension between the deliberately flat and idiomatic surface and the hypnotic, fantastically suggestive depths glinting beneath it. What mileage Peirce gets from such a plain phrase as "the way her hands were, under the leaves" — it's like a story by Eudora Welty or Elizabeth Bowen. And when in the last six lines she turns a corner as the speaker

shifts from memory into the present, from the blackberry-picking to the image of mending the horse, it's a move that seems completely unanticipated yet utterly right. Peirce mirrors the quicksilver processes of consciousness as accurately as any poet I know, and her collection should be widely admired.

David Walker

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